ソードアート・オンライン10

アリシゼーション・ランニング

謎のファンタジー世界に入り込んでしまったキリト。ＶＲＭＭＯチックなその空間で最初に出会った少年・ユージオ。≪ＮＰＣ≫とは思えないほど感情が豊かなその少年と共に、キリトは央都≪セントリア≫に向かい、

そして、二年が過ぎた――。

キリトとユージオは、≪北セントリア帝立修剣学院≫の≪初等練士≫となり、それぞれ先輩であるソルティリーナとゴルゴロッソの指導を仰ぎながら、人界最強の秩序執行者≪整合騎士≫を目指す日々に明け暮れていた。

央都を統べる≪公理教会≫の中枢にたどり着くため、二人はあまたの障害をはねのけ、学院にわずか十二人しか存在しない≪上級修剣士≫を目指す――！

壮大なるヴァーチャル・ワールド・スペクタクル!!

か-16-21

ソードアート・オンライン10
アリシゼーション・ランニング

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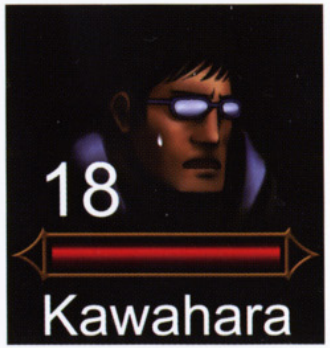

かわはら れき
川原 礫

プロフィール画像を更新したので改めて説明致しますと、顔の横の数字は年齢ではなく《現実世界のソロクエストで上がったレベル》です。一人で焼肉にいったりカラオケにいったり誕生日パーティーをしたりすると上がります。上がって嬉しいかどうかは大変微妙です。

【電撃文庫作品】

アクセル・ワールド 1～11
ソードアート・オンライン 1～10

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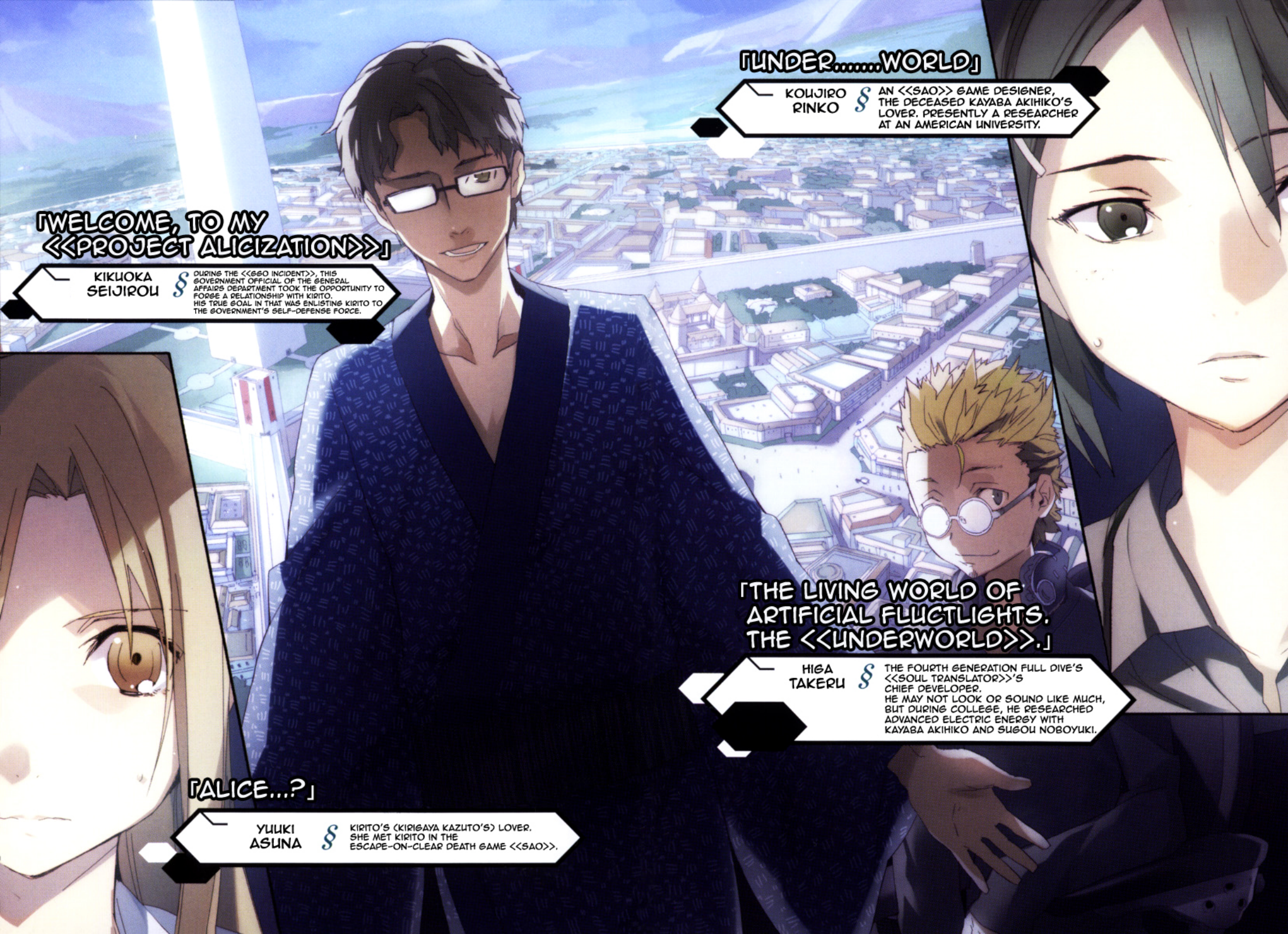
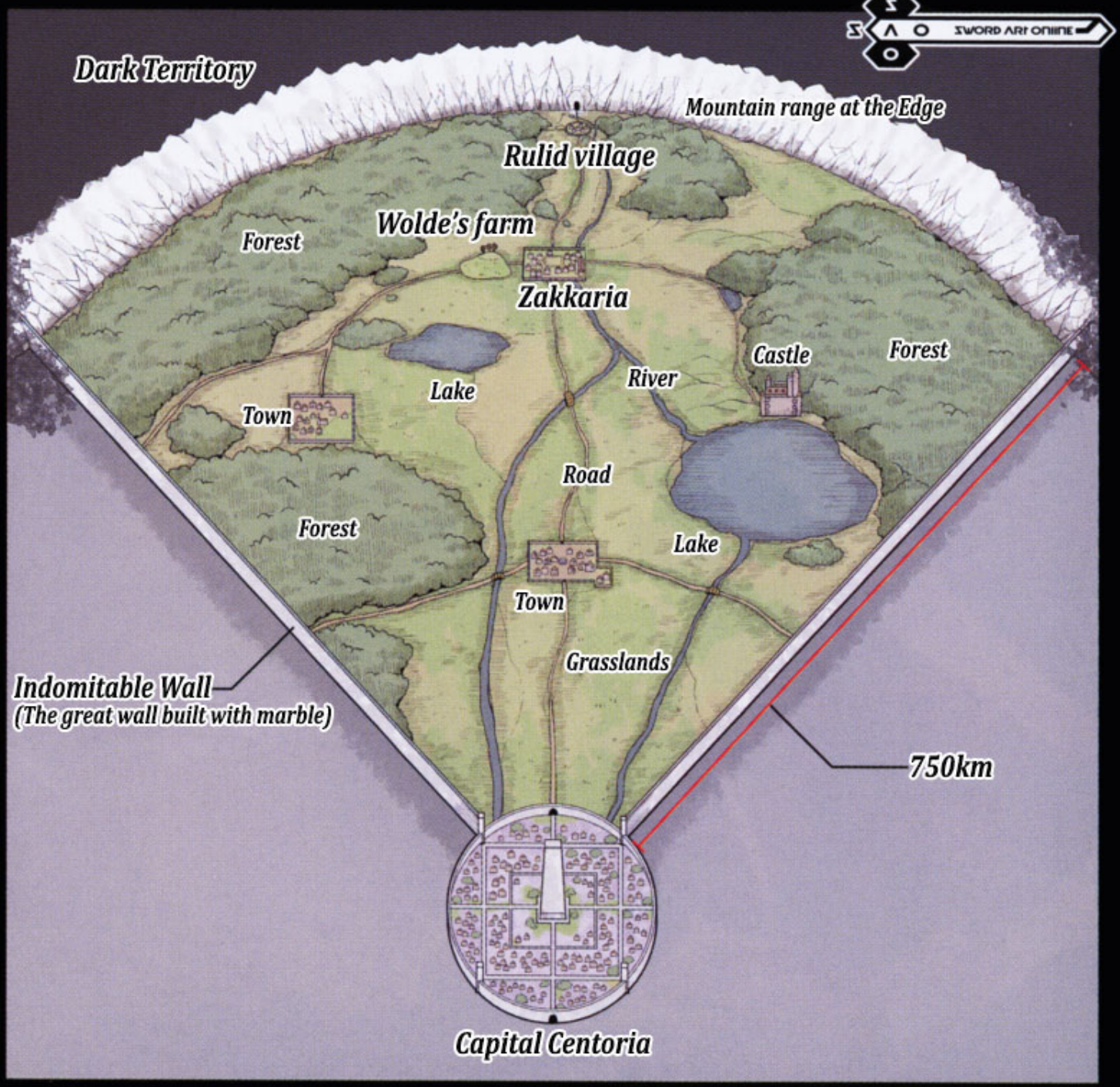

「WELCOME, TO MY <<PROJECT ALICIZATION>>」
KIKUOKA SEIJIROU
§ DURING THE <<GGO INCIDENT>>, THIS GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL OF THE GENERAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT TOOK THE OPPORTUNITY TO FORGE A RELATIONSHIP WITH KIRITO. HIS TRUE GOAL IN THAT WAS ENLISTING KIRITO TO THE GOVERNMENT'S SELF-DEFENSE FORCE.
「UNDER.....WORLD」
KOUJIRO RINKO
§ AN <<SAO>> GAME DESIGNER, THE DECEASED KAYABA AKIHIKO'S LOVER. PRESENTLY A RESEARCHER AT AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY.
「THE LIVING WORLD OF ARTIFICIAL FLUCTLIGHTS. THE <<UNDERWORLD>>.」
HIGA TAKERU
§ THE FOURTH GENERATION FULL DIVE'S <<SOUL TRANSLATOR>>'S CHIEF DEVELOPER. HE MAY NOT LOOK OR SOUND LIKE MUCH, BUT DURING COLLEGE, HE RESEARCHED ADVANCED ELECTRIC ENERGY WITH KAYABA AKIHIKO AND SUGOU NOBOYUKI.
「ALICE...?」
YUUKI ASUNA
§ KIRITO'S (KIRIGAYA KAZUTO'S) LOVER. SHE MET KIRITO IN THE ESCAPE-ON-CLEAR DEATH GAME <<SAO>>.

「---YOU'VE IMPROVED, KIRITO.」
SOLTERINA CELURUTE § A SENPAI AND SECOND-SEAT SWORDMASTER AT NORLANGARTH EMPIRE'S INDEPENDENT MASTER SWORD ACADEMY. SHE IS KNOWN WITHIN THE ACADEMY AS THE <<TACTICAL GUIDE>>.
「NO...
I'VE STILL GOT A LONG WAY TO GO.」
KIRITO § A YOUNG MAN LOST IN A MYSTERIOUS <<VIRTUAL WORLD>>. TO WIN AND ESCAPE FROM THIS WORLD, HE IS SEARCHING FOR THE <<SYSTEM CONSOLE>>.

「.....KAAAA!!」
UOLO LEVANTEINN
§
A SENPAI AND FIRST-SEAT SWORDMASTER AT NORLANGARTH EMPIRE'S INDEPENDENT MASTER SWORD ACADEMY. A USER OF THE TERRIFYING STRONG SWORD.
「.....!!」

「WHY DID YOU BUY THAT MANY?」
EUGEO § THE FIRST INHABITANT KIRITO MET IN THIS WORLD. HE TRAVELLED WITH KIRITO FROM RULID VILLAGE TO <<CENTORIA>>.
「YOU COULD HAVE JUST SAID IT DIRECTLY IF YOU WANTED SOME, EUGEO-KUN.」
「THA-THANK YOU VERY MUCH, ELITE SWORDSMAN TRAINEE-SAMA!」
RONYE § AIMING TO BE AN <<INTEGRETY KNIGHT>>, SHE ASSISTS KIRITO AS HIS <<VALET>>.
「LET'S HURRY BACK TO THE DORM SO THAT THE FOOD'S "LIFE" WON'T DROP TOO MUCH!」
TIEZÉ § AIMING TO BE AN <<INTEGRETY KNIGHT>>, SHE ASSISTS EUGEO AS HIS <<VALET>>.



«Norlangarth North Empire Full Map»

In Underworld, Rulid village is located in the northernmost remote region of the «Human World». Zakkaria is to the south of it. It is a town enclosed within a rectangle rampart. Its size is more than five times that of Rulid village's area. As it was built in the middle of a grassland, there are no rivers or lakes nearby, so the main source of water comes from wells. Its roads and buildings are almost completely built from reddish brown sandstone, the garments worn by the citizens uses red as a basic color too. The largest facility in Zakkaria is the «Meeting Hall», it has many uses, such as being the place where the feudal lord gives his speech, a stage for a band or troupe to display their public performance, or a battle ground for the sword arts tournament. The current feudal lord is Kelgam Zakkaright.

Located further south of Zakkaria is the biggest city of the Human World, the «Capital Centoria». It is enclosed in a perfect circle rampart with a diameter of ten kilol, with a population of over twenty thousand. The solid walls in the shape of an X divides the circular city into four equal parts, these separating walls are called the «Eternal Wall». «North Centoria», «East Centoria», «South Centoria», and «West Centoria» are what the divided municipals are called, they are the capitals of the four empires which divide and rule over the vast Human World.

In the middle of the «Capital», the heart of the Human World, is the pure white grand tower, the Axion Church «Central Cathedral». The tower is so tall its zenith is hazy and can't be seen, and the square grounds of the church is enclosed by a high wall, so it is impossible to see what lies inside. The «Eternal Wall» dividing the city of Centoria starts from the Cathedral, and stretches outward in four directions.

Within the highest ruling system «Axiom Church», in addition to having civil officials such as «Priests» and «Elders», the «Integrity Knights» serve as military officials. The knights who maintain the order of the world is the career all Master Swordsmen aspire to be. The Imperial Master Sword Academy of «North Centoria» is where the apprentices spend all their time training.

イラスト／来栖達也

Chapter 2 - Project Alicization

Part 1

The silvery white full moon, segmented into four by the cross-shaped window frame, could be seen looming above.

In the southwest corner of ALFheim, in the land of the Sylphs, the streets of the capital city Sylvain were wrapped in a thick veil of darkness.

Most of the shops had their sturdy metal shutters pulled down, and few players were moving around on the main streets. This was because the time was 4am, when the least number of people would be connected.

Asuna turned her eyes from the window to the table, and picked up the still steaming cup. She brought the thickly-colored tea to her lips, and could feel the illusory heat stimulate her tongue. Although she was not sleepy, her brain felt slightly fuzzy; she has had practically no sleep for the past 3 days.

She closed her eyes and used her fingers to tap her temple slightly. The other Sylph girl who saw this asked worriedly,

"Are you alright, Asuna-san? You haven't been sleeping."

"Yeeah, I'm fine here. You too, Lyfa. It must be tiring for you to walk around everywhere, right?"

"My real body is resting properly in my bed, so I'm alright."

Though they said they were fine in unison, they realized neither sounded very energetic at all, and gave wry smiles.

This place was the player home of Lyfa, the avatar of Kirigaya Suguha in ALfheim Online. The walls surrounding the round room had a glossy, iridescent sheen that constantly shifted in colour, creating a somewhat surreal atmosphere. A pearl white table and matching chairs were placed in the centre of the room, three of which were currently occupied.

On hearing the duo's conversation, the ice-blue haired girl with triangular ears clasped her fingers together on the table, opening her mouth,

"If you force yourself too much, your minds won't be able to work well during crucial moments. Even if you can't sleep, it makes a whole world of difference if you simply close your eyes."

The owner of the calm voice was Asada Shino, in the Cait Sith avatar which she had been diving in for the last half a year. The characters name was the same as the user- Sinon from Gun Gale Online. Asuna looked over and nodded.

"Alright... After the meeting's over, please allow me to use the bed here. Really, if only sleep spells were effective on the players as well."

"I think you can sleep well only if onii-chan sleeps on that rocking chair there..."

Asuna and Sinon smiled at Lyfa's mutterings, but the smiles they gave were tired ones.

Lyfa placed the cup she was holding with both hands back on the table, took a very deep breath, and changed her expression.

"Then... we'll start with the information we have gathered today, no, yesterday. In conclusion, we couldn't find any solid evidence that onii-chan was taken to the Tokorozawa National Defense Medical College Hospital. The data shows that he was definitely transferred to the Neurosurgical department on the 23rd floor, but they denied all access to the wards and not even the level can be accessed. There were also no signs of the emergency ambulance arriving there at the supposed time. We know this for certain since Yui has hacked into the surveillance cameras and checked the footage."

"In other words... There's a high probability that Kirito may not be in the Defense Medical Hospital... Something like that?"

Lyfa nodded, agreeing with what Sinon said.

"It's really hard to believe... But I'm surprised that not even family members can see him. It's strange no matter how you look at it..."

The rest of the words were left unsaid and simply replaced by collective headshakes. At that moment, the room descended into deep silence.

Lyfa's brother Kirito—Kirigaya Kazuto was attacked by the fugitive from the Death Gun incident, 'Johnny Black'—Kanemoto Atsushi just two days ago, on the 29th of June.

Kazuto was injected with a highly-dangerous drug, succinylcholine, by Kanemoto near Asuna's house on the streets of Setagaya area Miyasakai

1-chome in Tokyo. Under the paralysing effects of the drug, he quickly entered cardiac arrest. Even after CPR and medication were administered in the ambulance, the loss of oxygen caused his heart to stop soon after. He was classified as Dead on Arrival (DOA) the moment he arrived at Setagaya General Hospital.

Perhaps it was the expertise of the doctors in the ER or Kazuto's own will to live or that they had the best of luck on both accounts that he finally regained his heartbeat and started breathing normally once the drugs took effect, escaping from the claws of death in a miraculous manner. As Asuna heard this outcome from the doctor who came out from the ER, she relaxed her distraught look but was left speechless by the words that followed.

The doctor told her that as Kazuto's heart stopped for more than 5 minutes, it was possible that he could have sustained some damage to the brain. There was a possibility of long term damage to thought processes or motor functions, or both, and that in the worst case scenario, he might never wake up again—and,

The doctor concluded that a detailed investigation using an MRI was necessary to tell if this was the case, and they would probably transfer him over to a hospital with better facilities. Asuna fought against the anxiety that struck again and contacted Kazuto's little sister Suguha to explain the situation. In the end, she started crying the moment she saw Suguha.

That night, Kazuto's mother, Kirigaya Midori came running over from her workplace in Iidabashi and spent the night on the bench in front of the ICU.

The next day, on the 30th of June, Asuna and Suguha were convinced by the supervisor that he was already 'out of danger', and went back to Asuna's house which was nearby, and Midori went back to her house in Kawagoe for the time being to deal with his health insurance scheme.

After both of them had a shower, they each contacted their own schools about a leave of absence, chatted for several hours, then entered a light sleep. About an hour later, Asuna was woken by Midori's phone call.

She dashed toward the portable terminal and Midori told her that unfortunately, Kazuto had still not regained consciousness, but he was to be transferred to the Defense Medical College Hospital that was nearer to her house in Kawagoe for closer observation and a better equipped facility. After that, the ambulance arrived to transfer Kazuto. Midori said that she

would head over in a taxi once she was done with the procedures, and Asuna told her that they would soon arrive at the new hospital.

The unconscious Kazuto was definitely moved from the Setagaya General Hospital through the emergency exit and into the ambulance at around 1.45pm on the 30th. Yui clearly investigated it from the clear visuals of the surveillance cameras of the hospital. The records showed that the ambulance reached the Defense Medicine College Hospital in Tokorozawa in Saitama. Kazuto was immediately admitted into the neurosurgical department on the 23rd level for intensive care, and was under observation— Asuna and Suguha both believed it without a doubt, and they went to visit him two days ago late at night, but they were not allowed to see Kazuto or even view him from afar.

Asuna analyzed Lyfa's words as she nodded slightly and said,

"It's true that Kirito-kun was sent from the hospital in Setagaya by ambulance and the destination was the National Defense Medical University Hospital. There's an admission record for 'Kirigaya Kazuto'... but there's no report of how Kirito-kun looked, nor were there records from the surveillance camera. It's possible the ambulance Kirito-kun rode on went to some place other than the hospital... like a mix up of patients or some other accident— but, most likely not..."

"There's an intent to lie, which means that it was planned by someone... Abduction?"

Sinon said with a calm voice, even as her triangular ears jerked sharply.

"But in that situation, the ambulance in question would be disguised, right? Leaving aside the paramedics, the vehicle itself would be fake, right? I don't think anyone could have predicted that onii-chan would be attacked in Setagaya by that guy called Kanemoto or something, and be hospitalized. Also, it was only 18 hours after he had been hospitalized."

"It's physically impossible to arrange a fake ambulance after they knew that Kirito-kun collapsed."

Asuna's doubt again overlapped with the question Sinon raised.

"But in that case, if there's an abduction of a patient using a fraudulent ambulance, what if the person who planned this right from the beginning targeted Kirito simply out of coincidence..."

"To put it simply, it doesn't really feel that way."

Lyfa swung her ponytail sideways and started to explain in a surging manner,

"Fuu, when the hospital transfers a patient, it should make a call to request an ambulance from the emergency control command area, but according to Yui's investigations, nobody made a call that day, and the ambulance in question appeared at that moment. Then, it would be the same for the paramedics who rode on the ambulance, and the situation with the Tokorozawa Defense College Hospital should be the same as well. Not only that, they even knew onii-chan's name. The supervisor who was in charge of it did say that they had not made a mistake."

"...Then, they were targeting Kirito right from the beginning in a ploy to abduct him."

"Yeah, the culprit got news once Kirito-kun entered the hospital and sent a real ambulance for their own purposes."

Both of them nodded in a hesitant manner in response to Asuna's words.

The reason why they were so hesitant was because it was too scary to conclude and link everything together. Asuna herself had the same feeling as well. If everything was true, the opponent who abducted Kazuto was someone influential enough to mobilize the ambulance service.

To be honest, those thoughts may all have been excessive thinking on their parts.

It could be that Kazuto was being treated in the Defense Medical University Hospital, the images of the hospital room could not be seen because of the sophisticated machines, and at the moment he had arrived there, there was no record because the surveillance cameras seemed to be faulty... No, it could be said that this line of consideration was not normal. In fact, Kazuto and Suguha's mother Midori did not doubt the hospital's current explanation. The abduction and falsified information was just the imagination of the three girls who loved to worry. The culprit in real life did not exist, and Kazuto's treatment would be a success and they would definitely be notified with news the moment he regained consciousness...

However, a certain part of Asuna's derailed common sense had a pained feeling within. That must be the same with Kazuto's little sister Lyfa, and Sinon who had nearly crossed the line of death with him.

They were not assuming that the third 'Death Gun' Kanemoto's attack when he injected the toxin succinylcholine into Kazuto was part of the plan. However, the person probably made use of this incident to abduct Kazuto.

"Whether it's an organization or a person, that guy can be considered an 'enemy' in this situation."

Asuna said in an adamant voice. Sinon blinked, and then showed a slight smile. "Before I arrived here... today, I thought you two would be very despondent and I was rather worried. To Lyfa, it's because he's her most important brother, to Asuna, it's because, well, he's her boyfriend... And that guy disappeared like this while unconscious..."

Speaking of which, I wasn't as shocked as I thought I would be after hearing these unexpected words. I was crying so hard when I saw Kirito-kun collapse that night... Asuna felt some sense of disbelief as she thought about this, and Lyfa, who had both hands clasped tightly in front of her chest, said,

"Well... I'd definitely be worried. However, when I realized that onii-chan may not be in the hospital, I felt somewhat uneasy and yet had a little feeling that it was like this. Onii-chan definitely got involved in some astonishing incident again... I really can't imagine how chaotic the places were since I wasn't there. It was like that in the SAO incident, the same with that Death Gun incident... So this time, I'll definitely..."

"Yes... I see."

So I can't compare to the little sister who has lived with him for a long time. Asuna murmured within her heart and she nodded hard.

"Kirito-kun is definitely fighting like normal someplace as usual, so we have to carry out the fight we can handle."

Of course. Sinon glanced aside for a moment and continued to stare at them.

"Sinonon doesn't look too despondent either."

"Eh... That's because... to me, I strongly believe that I'm the only one who can beat him..."

After exchanging doubtful looks with the stuttering Sinon for a moment, Asuna went back to the original topic.

"Anyway... Just by looking at the ambulance, I guess the influence of the enemy is rather large."

"How about we report this to the police? If we're together with the police, the hospital will at least have to provide us with some information, right?"

Sinon's suggestion made some sense to them, but Asuna shook her head slightly to disagree.

"In that Defense Medical College Hospital's server, the time Kirito-kun arrived and the time the neurosurgical department took him in were all recorded. The records show that Kirito-kun was definitely in that hospital. The basis for our assumption that he was kidnapped is that 'There were no images of him reaching' that place, and the police won't mobilize for such a reason, I guess... And also, the one who checked the visual records was..."

"Yui-chan who hacked in."

Sinon gave a slight grimace as she muttered, and seemed to think of something else as she continued,

"Ah... But in that case, can we hack into the camera network inside of the hospital through the surveillance cameras outside the hospital? If we can check the images in Kirito-kun's room..."

"But the internal hospital's security system is different from the outside. It's most likely protected by a very powerful firewall that even Yui-chan can't break through."

Lyfa weakly shook her head.

Yesterday, she went to carry out various investigations on Setagaya General Hospital and the National Defense Medical College Hospital which were far away from each other. Even though she had the help of the AI Yui who was bound to the portable terminal, just progressing was really hard.

Of course, Asuna herself went along and it seemed like Kirito's condition had already stabilized, but by then she had already skipped school for 2 straight days without permission. The electronic money payment terminal that was supposed to be backup power was left with Lyfa when they rode on the taxi, and naturally, she was not able to concentrate on her classes at all.

In school, Kazuto's absence was explained by a critical illness, and the same was told to their classmates. Amongst their friends,

Lisbeth/Shinozaki Rika and Silica/Ayano Keiko did not know about the attack at all. The guilt of hiding the truth from the two of them who were both worried about Kazuto ripped at their hearts.

However, this had been discussed with Lyfa yesterday morning. Before they knew the actual situation— whether Kazuto was really in the National Defense Medical College Hospital, they would keep this secret between the three of them, including Sinon.

The reason why they only contacted Sinon was that she had met Kazuto at the 'Dicey Café' before the attack and because she was involved in the Death Gun incident. However, it was thanks to this that her calmness and intellect boosted everyone's confidence. Asuna stared at the side of the sniper Sinon's face, a face that never changed in ALO, and said,

"I feel that the greatest weapon we have is that we understand more about Kirito-kun than anyone else. So, let's take a step back and discuss. The enemy targeted Kirito-kun, but for what reason?"

"If it's for the sake of money, the kidnapping would be aimed at Asuna, yet the culprit never contacted us, right?"

"Telephone, e-mail, or letters, there have been none at all. Besides, this kidnapping was too reckless. They even prepared a fake ambulance to kidnap onii-chan specifically from the hospital, who isn't anyone significant."

"Then... I don't really want to consider this, but what if it's because of a grudge...? Do you know any opponent who hates Kirito...?"

This time, Asuna shook her head slightly.

"Even though there are people amongst the SAO survivors who hate Kirito for sending them directly to prison and for clearing the game, the only opponent who has such financial strength and organization ability is..."

Asuna recalled the face of Sugou Nobuyuki, the ambitious person who once trapped the SAO players as test subjects in his abominated research and was handed over to the police by Kirito. However, that person was locked within the walls of the detention barracks, and his attempt to escape overseas caused his appeal for bail to be rejected.

"...Yeah, we still haven't thought of who can do such a thing."

"It's neither for money nor a grudge, huh...? Hmm..."

Sinon lowered her head for a while, used her fingers to tap the tips of her ears, and said in an uncertain manner.

"...Well, I guess it was just completely baseless conjecture... The motive isn't for money or a grudge, but he was still kidnapped. That means that to the enemy, Kirito is an existence which still needs to be kept alive. To put it more specifically what they want is Kirito himself, or what he has... In game terms, his 'element', right? What can we think of?"

"Swordsmanship."

Asuna immediately answered without hesitation. Whenever she closed her eyes and imagined Kirito's silhouette, the first thing that would appear was the normally black-clothed Kirito of old who would wield two swords and slash at enemies like a hurricane. It seemed that Lyfa had the same impression on him after travelling with him in ALO as she immediately continued,

"Reaction speed."

"Ability to react to a system."

"Situation assessment."

"Survival ability... I guess."

Asuna and Lyfa each raised many examples then seemed to realize something as they kept quiet. Sinon also seemed to realize something as she too nodded,

"Hey, those are all situations in VRMMOs... the virtual world, right?"

Sinon said, and Asuna tentatively gave a wry smile,

"Actually, Kirito-kun in real life has lots of good points."

"Of course he does, like when he treats us to meals. But from a perspective outside of ours, Kirito in real life, I would say, is a very ordinary high school student, right? In other words, the motive behind that unreasonable action is the outstanding ability Kirito has in the virtual reality world, right?"

"How can that be...? In other words, they want him to clear a certain VR game... But onii-chan is currently still unconscious. He hasn't even gone through a check up, let alone treatment. They can't do anything if he's abducted like that, right...?"

Lyfa clasped her hands tightly as she again worried about Kirito's current condition. Sinon's blue eyes fell to the metallic table surface as she thought for a moment then she narrowed them sharply before answering,

"Vague motive... Even though you say that, that's only what we can see from the outside. What if it's not via the brain, but by a machine that can connect directly to the soul..."

"Ah..."

Why didn't we think about it? Asuna was shocked as she sighed hard.

"Well, if we consider it that way, the organization of the 'enemy' should have some clues. There's only one organization in the world that has a machine that can be connected to the soul, and Kirito acted as a test-diver for it a few days ago."

Asuna agreed with Sinon's words as she nodded her head and said,

"...The organization that kidnapped Kirito-kun is the organization RATH that developed the Soul Translator...? It's true that our opponent might be able to mobilize an ambulance if they had the finances to make such a machine..."

"RATH...? Is that the company onii-chan was working with for the past few days?"

On hearing Lyfa's words, Asuna couldn't help but stiffen her body up,

"Lyfa-chan, do you know the situation about RATH?"

"Ah, no, the details are that... I heard that the company itself is in Roppongi."

"Since you say that, I think I have heard about them. But even when you say it's in Roppongi, isn't that too big an area... RATH's research center is in a particular place there, and Kirito may be inside. The police won't take action on their own, right?"

Asuna watched Sinon bite her lips and Lyfa lowering her eyes in an uneasy manner, and said in a hesitant tone,

"...Well, I wanted to say this later, so I didn't say it. in fact, there's still a small link of communication that's in contact with Kirito-kun, but there's a high chance that they broke the bond sometime ago..."

"...What is it, Asuna?"

"You said it before, didn't you, Sinonon. Kirito-kun's implant."

Asuna used the fingertips of her right hand to point at the center of her own chest.

"Ah, I see... It's the vitality sensor, right? It's true that the information is sent through the net in realtime to your terminal, Asuna..."

"Even though the signal is already severed, if we can track the fake ambulance's whereabouts during the time it delivered Kirito-kun, we might be able to figure out where he is now. That's what I'm thinking, so I'm requesting for it to be analyzed."

"...Who?"

Asuna looked up at the sky and called a name out in place of an answer,

"Yui-chan, how is it?"

Immediately, particles of light appeared several millimeters above the surface of the table to form a little humanoid silhouette which after briefly glowing stronger, dissipated.

What emerged was a girl less than 10 centimeters tall. She had long black hair and a white one-piece skirt on, and the 4 rainbow wings on her back fluttered slightly. The girl— a pixie, widened her eyes under her long eyelashes, and moved her adorable eyes slightly as she first turned towards Asuna, and then to Lyfa and Sinon. Of course, once she deduced that she was to answer Sinon first, she floated in the air and bowed.

"Long time no see, Sinon-san."

Sinon was addressed by the clear gossamer voice as she showed a slight smile and nodded back,

"Good evening, Yui-chan...no, I should say 'good morning' here."

"The time now is 4:32am. Sunrise is 4:20am today, so it can be assumed to be morning. Good morning, Lyfa-san, mama."

Yui, the player assistance AI that originated from the old SAO, turned 60 degrees to the side as she greeted, and again floated in front of Asuna.

"The signal tracking on papa's pulse that was sent to mama's terminal is 98% complete."

"I see. If that signal came out from near Roppongi, the basis behind our guess will be strengthened... That's how it is, huh?"

Asuna nodded hard at Sinon's words. Including Lyfa, the trio stared at Yui with very expectant looks.

"Then, I'll report the results of the analysis thus far. Although not as great as the National Defense Medicine College Hospital's, as the defenses of the portable terminal's relay station were rather tough as well, I could only pinpoint signals sent from three locations."

After saying that, Yui quickly waved her right hand, and on the surface of the table under her bare feet, a watercolor hologram appeared, showing a detailed map of the center of Tokyo. Yui's wings stopped flapping as she landed, took a few small steps over and pointed to a part of the map. *Pon*. A red dot of light appeared.

"This is the Setagaya General Hospital papa was sent to at first. This then is the place where the first signal was released."

She moved a few steps to a new spot of light.

"Meguro Aobadai, Sanchome, the time was around 2026 29th June, 20.50pm. We can predict the path they took."

The two light spots were then extrapolated from with a white light trail. Yui moved a few steps to the southwestern side again, and a third spot of light indicated the location. The trail of light then stretched further.

"The location where the second signal was fired was at Shirokanedai Minato-ku Ichome, and the time was around 21.10pm that day."

Isn't that a little too far south from Setagaya to Roppongi? Asuna thought with some uneasiness, but could only close her mouth and wait for Yui to finish.

"And then... the third place where the signal was launched is here."

The trio's expectations' were severely stymied— Yui pointed at an artificial construction site far to the east from Roppongi.

"Shinkiba, Koutou, Yonchome, the time was 21.50 that day. It was around 30 hours ago, the last time, before papa's signal was cut off."

"Shinkiba...!?"

Asuna couldn't help but utter, then after thinking about it, there were many new intelligence buildings developed nearby there. There might be a second base of RATH located somewhere over there.

"Yui-chan... What kind of facilities are there?"

She asked as she felt her heart race, but the answer she got defied her guess.

"The facility located over there is called the 'Tokyo Heliport'."

"Eh...? Isn't that, the launch site for helicopters?"

Sinon muttered with a shocked expression, and Lyfa immediately changed her expression.

"A helicopter!? ...That means... onii-chan was taken somewhere further away... Is that it?"

"But... Wait."

Asuna continued to try and clear the confusion in her mind as she said,

"Yui-chan, the signal was completely cut off after it was sent from Shinkiba, right?"

"Yes..."

At this moment, for the first time, the pixie Yui's adorable face was showing a melancholic look.

"There's no sign of papa's monitor device connected to any of the terminal stations in the whole of Japan."

"In that case... After he was taken in the helicopter from Shinkiba, he landed in some deep mountain where the electric signals of the terminal can't reach... Or the wilderness or something like that, right?"

Sinon shook her head to deny Lyfa's words.

"Even if it landed somewhere, there has to be some facility as the destination. They could first enter an area with the most advanced electronic interference then interchange at that point..."

"What if it's not in Japan... but outside..."

No one could immediately give an answer to Asuna's trembling voice.

The only thing that broke that short silence was Yui's pristine and calm voice.

"There's only one military helicopter that can fly from Tokyo to outside of the country. I can't be certain due to the lack of current data, but I feel that papa should still be somewhere within the country."

"Yeah. RATH is researching on something that can override the current virtual technology, right? It's an enterprise that's highly classified, so it's really hard to imagine the research facility being located outside the country."

On hearing Sinon's words, Asuna nodded in agreement. The combined Electronics Manufacturer her father lead was in turmoil because a corporate spy switched sides. The important research facilities were guarded very tightly like the Tama Hills. It was said that there had to be strict security on research facilities. If there were a lot of bases outside the country, the chances of information being revealed would definitely be greater than if it was within the country.

Lyfa showed a look of deep thought, lowered her head and muttered,

"Then... It's definitely somewhere inside Japan, far away from people, isn't it...? But can they really build such a secretive research facility in the current Japan?"

"And it's not just on the scale of doing so secretly... Yui-chan, is there something you know about RATH?"

The moment Asuna asked, Yui again floated into the air, stopped at the height of the trio's stares, and said,

"I used 12 public and 3 private search engines to begin my search, but I couldn't find any suitable match regarding the enterprise's name, facility's name or even VR technical related items. Also, I couldn't find any information regarding the technology on the 'Soul Translator', including the completion of a patent request."

"They didn't even submit a patent for such a great invention that can read a person's soul and record them... It really is a tightly guarded secret..."

It looks like we won't be able to find any openings from outside of RATH. Asuna sighed, and Sinon shook her head blankly.

"For some reason... It's like we're wondering whether the enterprise actually exists. If I had known, I would have asked Kirito more about it... Did he mention any hints that might help us the last time we met...?"

"Umm..."

She frowned and tried desperately to rummage through her memories. Kanemoto's attack and the suspicion of abduction shocked her really hard, and the peaceful conversation she had in the Dicey Café before that seemed to be covered by a fog, like the distant past.

"At that time, it's true that... we were talking constantly about the Soul Translator, and before we knew it, evening had fallen. After that... I think he did mention a bit about how the name RATH came about..."

"Ahh... There's a monster that's either a pig or a turtle in 'Alice in Wonderland'. It's a little weird to say that though, since a pig doesn't look like a turtle."

"Lewis Carroll who created this name didn't seem to specify what it was, and the subsequent analysis on Alice seemed to define it that way..."

Asuna sensed something flash by her mind, and as she spoke, she suddenly stopped.

"Alice...? Did Kirito-kun say anything about Alice when he exited the shop?"

"Eh?"

Sinon and Lyfa, who had been keeping quiet, widened their eyes.

"Does onii-chan have something to do with Alice in Wonderland?"

"No, that's not it... At the RATH research facility, isn't Alice some sort of shortened form or something... Well, it's common, right? Take out the first letters of each related term and combine them to form another meaning..."

"That's the so-called 'Acronym' right? The departments related to the American government often do that to make it easier to read."

Sinon chimed in with extra tidbits of information, and Lyfa shook her ponytail as she said,

"In other words... If we combine the 5 letters, we'll get A, L, I, C, E... like that?"

"Yeah, that's it. Yes, Kirito-kun did mention..."

She gathered her concentration with all her strength, and deep within her ears, Kirito's ever-familiar voice rang. She cautiously described,

"...Aateifisharu...Reibiru...Interijen... I can't recall what C and E were for, but I think that's what A, L and I stand for."

Asuna finally articulated as she felt her head ache slightly, perhaps because she also squeezed out the substance of her memories. However, the other two continued to think while looking like they did not notice.

"Aateifisharu... That would be 'artificial'. Interijen...ce, that would be 'intelligence'... Then what's an English term for Reibiru?"

Sinon raised her question, and Yui, who was in the air, immediately answered.

"From the pronunciation, I think the most suitable term should be 'labile', very adaptive."

After a short pause.

"'Artificial Labile Intelligence'. If we translate it, it would mean 'A highly adaptive Artificial Intelligence'."

"Artificial...Intelligence."

Asuna could not help but blink as this term popped out without a reaction.

"Ahh I see... Artificial Intelligence would mean 'AI', something related to your existence, Yui. But what has a company that's developing a brand new Brain-Machine Interface got to do with AIs?"

"Doesn't it refer to characters that can move within virtual space? Like that NPC over there?"

Sinon lifted her right hand and pointed at the window as she said that. Asuna continued to speak, as she thought they had not yet grasped the main point.

"But... If this company RATH originated from 'Alice In Wonderland', then if the term 'Alice' RATH uses is a codeword for something related to Artificial Intelligence... Wouldn't that be strange? That means that company's aim isn't to develop the next generation VR interface, but to produce AIs from their research?"

"Hmm— Is that so...? But the NPCs inside games aren't really valuable... The disk-use AI programs are mostly sold everywhere. Is it really something special, that there's a need to hide the enterprise and even abduct someone?"

The moment Sinon asked that, Asuna could not answer immediately. For every step she took forward, there was an annoying feeling of hitting a wall. Is our guess a complete mistake? Terrified, Asuna still hoped to find some sort of a clue as she lifted her head to ask Yui,

"Hey, Yui-chan. What is 'Artificial Intelligence' anyway?"

Yui then showed a rare bitter smile on her face and landed on the table.

"Are you sure you want to ask me, mama? To mama, it's like asking 'what are humans'.."

"That's true."

"Strictly put, such a definition like 'This is an Artificial Intelligence' is impossible. In this world, a real Artificial Intelligence has never existed, whether in the past or the present."

Yui leaned slightly on the edge of the teapot, and her words caused the trio to all blink their eyes in shock.

"Eh, bu-but... You're an AI, right, Yui-chan? That means you're an Artificial Intelligence, right?"

Lyfa stammered as she said, and Yui tilted her head, keeping quiet like a teacher who was thinking of how to explain to her students, nodded a bit, then started explaining,

"Let's start from what we have called an AI before— In the last century, the people who developed AIs were aiming for a common goal through two paths. One of them is the 'top-down-type AI', and the other is called the 'bottom-up-type AI'.

Asuna pricked up her ears, trying her best to understand the content of the pure and innocent voice that the delicate girl spoke in.

"First, regarding the top-down AI, it's a kind that purely relies on the existing computer architecture to accumulate experience through simple questions and answers, ultimately becoming a real intellectual through learning. Including me, most AIs are all top-down-type, so that means... the 'knowledge' I have now may look similar to yours, mama, but it in fact is something completely different. To put it directly, an existence like mine is just a collection of a system that can only 'Hear a question A and reply with B'."

Yui said that as her clear white cheeks showed some signs of loneliness. Are my eyes playing tricks on me? Asuna thought.

"If, how mama asked me 'What is an AI?', and how I immediately showed a 'bitter smile' or some variation like that, that would be because papa mostly made such an expression, and I gained experience and learned it when I am asked about myself. The basis itself is not really that different from the predictive text app in mama's portable terminal —because of this, the top-down-type AIs as they currently stand are nowhere near the level of being a real AI. This is the 'so-called AI' I just explained to Lyfa-san, so please understand it like that."

After saying that, Yui turned her eyes to the distant moon outside the window.

"...Now, I'll explain about the other kind, the 'bottom-up AI'. This is similar to your brain, mama... everyone has billions upon billions of brain cells that are all interconnected within a biological organ, and the aim is to recreate this through artificial electronic devices to create awareness."

That's really too ambitious... a concept that's completely absurd. Asuna could not help but mutter.

"Is...Isn't that too preposterous...?"

"Ehh."

Yui immediately nodded her head in agreement.

"As far as I know, the bottom-up type was a path that was discontinued before they even planned the experiment. If it is actually realised, the awareness that would actually reside within it would be different from my kind, an existence that should really be on the same level as humans like you, mama, everyone..."

Yui diverted her stare back from afar, took a deep breath, and concluded.

"As I said, right now, there are two rationales for the term Artificial Intelligence — AI. One of them would be like me, an NPC that is part analytical program and part character, a pseudo-AI. The other kind would be one that can develop concepts, those would have the ability to create and adapt while learning, a true Artificial Intelligence."

"Adaptability..."

Asuna muttered as she parroted the word.

"'A highly adaptive Artificial Intelligence'."

She returned the stares of the duo and Yui, one by one, gradually formed a conclusion in her mind, then slowly turned it into words.

"Wha...What if RATH developed the STL not as an aim, but as a means...? Well, it's true that Kirito-kun had such a doubt before. RATH wanted to do something with the STL, so... If through the analysis of the human soul, the first real... bottom-up AI in the world... if that happens..."

"Then, the real codename of the AI would be 'Alice'... wouldn't it?"

On hearing Asuna's words, Lyfa muttered. Sinon had a similarly lost expression as she continued,

"In other words, RATH isn't an enterprise that develops the next generation of VR interfaces... But in fact, an enterprise that aims to develop Artificial Intelligence... Is that it?"

As they continued to discuss the situation with the 'enemy',the severity of it gradually became apparent. Such development caused the trio to quieten down. It seemed that Yui herself could not handle all the information, as she frowned.

Asuna reached her hand out to her mug, reheated it from a pop-up menu, then took a large gulp from it, "houu", she sighed, and then said as she considered her opinion on the enemy's strength,

"If RATH is the 'enemy', this won't be any ordinary enterprise we're dealing with. Considering the method they used for the abduction -sending a fake ambulance to a helicopter, and that there's a monster-like machine called the STL in that research facility -which we don't even know the location of, with the aim of creating an AI that's on par with a human. Then... the one who introduced Kirito-kun to work for RATH was Chrysheight... Kikouka-san of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. That guy has many links with the VR-related world, and speaking of which, RATH may have some national ties..."

"Kikuoka Seijirou. As I expect, he's not just a bespectacled man who's pretending to be stupid like I saw... Can we still contact him?"

Sinon, who was frowning away, shook her head weakly.

"As of two days ago, we couldn't reach him by phone, and he wouldn't even send a message in return. During this time of emergency, I wanted to charge into the virtual division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, but it would most likely be futile."

"Yeah... Even though Kirito had once tried to track that guy down, that guy easily shook him off, or at least that's what Kirito said..."

4 years after the SAO incident, the «SAO Incident Victims Rescue Countermeasure Team» was placed within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Technology, and after the incident was resolved, it was left behind as a division to deal with virtual related problems. One of them was the civil servant with black-framed spectacles, Kikuoka Seijirou,

who seemed to have established contact with Kazuto after Kazuto returned to the real world. For some reason, he paid a high price to buy the services of the ordinary high school student in the real world, Kazuto, and requested him to investigate the Death Gun Incident.

Asuna met him several times in the real world as well, and she partied with his avatar in the world of ALO, the Undine Chrysheight. However, she felt that under his relaxed and friendly attitude, there was something hidden, an impression that she could not ignore no matter what, even now. He called himself a civil servant but had no permanent place and was often treated coldly, so perhaps he was from a department that was more exclusive —Kazuto had doubts about this as well.

Kikuoka introduced Kazuto to the mysterious enterprise called RATH for a part-time job. Asuna had tried many times to contact him once Kazuto disappeared, but his portable terminal was always set to auto-reply and he could not be contacted.

She angrily called the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Technology, only to be told that Kikuoka was working overseas. It was reasonable that he could not be contacted because of that— But thinking about it the other way, was Kazuto's disappearance related to that man? One could not help but wonder.

"But..."

At this moment, Asuna and Sinon stared at each other's frowning faces, and Lyfa said slowly,

"If Kikuoka is the link between RATH and the nation, why must he still work covertly no matter what? There's a need to protect secrets for the benefit of the company, but if it's an amazing scheme the nation is pursuing, wouldn't it be better to promote it hugely under normal circumstances?"

"Now that you mention it... That's true..."

Sinon turned her head around nimbly, nodded and answered.

In recent years, this, together with the development of the virtual space technology, were two brand new frontiers. While each country was rapidly developing -America, and later Japan announced the construction of a spaceship that did not use external boosters, an artificial base on the moon, and the construction of a space station elevator. The impact of the development of real Artificial Intelligence was unprecedented, and each

government had their reasons to protect their secrets -which Asuna had not thought of.

But if that were true, if Kirito's abduction was something classified at a national level, then it would be impossible to think that they could do anything as ordinary high school students... Besides, this was an area that could not be accessed without police interference. Asuna drooped her shoulders as she was beaten by her weakness, and her eyes met Yui's as Yui looked up at her from the table.

"Yui-chan...?"

"Pull yourself together, mama. Papa never thought of surrendering when he was searching for you in ALFheim here."

"Bu...But...I..."

"It's your turn to look for papa, mama!"

At that moment, Yui, who proposed her responses were part of a simple learning program, showed a kind and warm smile that could not be imagined with her words.

"There's still definitely a way to contact papa. Even if the enemy is the Japanese government, I believe that it definitely won't break the bond between mama and papa."

"...Thank you, Yui-chan. I will never give up. Even if the country is our enemy... I'll barge into parliament and grab the necks of the prime minister and the officials."

"That's the spirit!"

Asuna and her daughter stared at each other and smiled. Sinon smiled as she looked at them, and suddenly frowned hard,

"...? What is it, Sinonon?"

"No, well... The current problem is that even if RATH is a national research organization, I guess the government or the parliament still doesn't know the specifics about the research."

"Yes... and then?"

"If this were a secret plan of a clandestine department, I don't feel that it's easy to hide that department, right?"

"What...?"

"The budget! Whether it's a research facility or the STL, there's definitely a need for a huge budget. I'm not sure how many millions or billions or more, but I think it's impossible to withdraw such a sum secretly from the treasury... In other words, they need to account for it as part of the country's budget under some name, right?"

"Yes, but... according to what Yui-chan searched, looking at those related to VR technology which require such a large budget is... Ah, I see... It's the wrong term...? It's not VR technology, but Artificial Intelligence...?"

Yui looked over at Asuna and nodded with a serious expression, telling her to hold on for a moment before opening her arms wide. Her fingertips glowed purple, and she connected to the network from within ALO.

The trio spent several seconds full of expectations and uneasiness. Yui opened her thin eyes and said in an unemotional tone that was like an electronic ethereal voice which was completely different from several seconds ago.

"Connected to the budget information data of each ministry and agency. Artificial Intelligence, AI, 38 other similar keywords are being searched now... Confirmed 18 universities, 7 third-party departments, sums used for each research project are all small... Land infrastructure and maritime exploration development projects... Automobile development project... concluding them to be unrelated..."

After that, Yui again raised a few items that were hard to comprehend, but deemed that they also were unrelated, and continued to raise examples before finally shaking her head slightly.

"...I can't find any suitable and aberrant large budget sums through normal searches and special searches. Maybe it's divided into many small sums and disguised, which makes it hard to find out from the uncovered reports."

"I see... As expected, we find out that there are no avenues left open by them..."

Sinon folded her arms as she groaned. Asuna sounded like she was grasping at straws as she raised her voice to shout, "But."

"—There might be a hidden budget of RATH amongst the items Yui-chan found. Why aren't we finding it? Well, I think that marine resources have nothing to do with this... So why must they carry out such a research?"

"Erm..."

Yui again widened her eyes slightly, connected herself to the relevant database, and immediately lifted her head.

"...I guess it's some form of research like searching for oil underwater or precious metal deposits on the surface of the seabed and letting a small submarine navigate on its own. There would likely be a slightly large budget channeled for those submarines that house such AIs as priority."

"Heh... That sort of thing has to be robotized... Where are they developing it?"

"The project is located in the... «Ocean Turtle». It was finished this year, a mega-float that aimed at researching on the ocean."

"I-I saw it on the news before."

Lyfa interrupted.

"It appears a little like a ship with a pyramid floating on the sea."

Asuna silenced herself and frowned. She lowered her head for a while then suddenly lifted it back up,

"Speaking of which, I did hear about this before. Ocean... Turtle..."

"Hey, Yui-chan... Do you have a picture of that research facility?"

"Yes, please hold on for a moment."

Yui waved her right hand, and a screen appeared on the table like the previous map, before immediately forming a 3-D image of the sea. What appeared was a complicated wire frame that was drawn on the center of the picture and a refined texture.

What appeared on the small sea was truly something that one would immediately call a black pyramid.

But, viewed from above, it was not square, but a rectangle that had edges with a ratio of 2 to 3. The height of the pyramid was approximately the same length as the shorter side. If one removed the long and narrow

windows, the exterior would look like it was giving off a dark grey glossy glow. If one looked at it, one would get the feeling of an equilateral hexagon that had solar panels placed tightly together.

There were projections from the four corners, and on one of the short sides, you could see a small command bridge attached. The H-logo on the roof would be the helipad, but it looked rather small. From a calculation based on the scale of the length, it was a shocking 400m.

"I see... The four legs, four sided head, the pyramid-like shell, this does look like a turtle. But isn't that too big..."

Sinon said in near amazement. Asuna swayed around to look, and pointed at the bridge of the Ocean Turtle with her right index finger.

"But, look, the head here looks like it has a protrusion on the front face. Can you tell what kind of animal it is?"

"Ah— That's true. It really looks like a pig. A turtle pig that can swim."

Lyfa said with an innocent voice.

And then, seemingly shocked by her own words, she widened her eyes, moving her lips continuously before squeezing out with her hoarse voice.

"If it's a turtle... and also a pig..."

Asuna, Sinon and Lyfa exchanged looks with each other silently, and then shouted,

"—RATH!"

Part 2

The EC135-type helicopter passed through the thick fog above the sea, and from the window could be seen a large blue expanse below.

Unlike the view from a passenger plane at high altitudes -here, the wave peaks could be clearly seen and the sunlight dazzled from the surface of the sea as Koujiro Rinko thought, How many years has it been since I last played in the sea?

It would take merely an hour for Rinko to move from her current workplace, the California Technical Institute to the San Francisco Bay area, but even

though she could have enjoyed a sunbathing lifestyle whenever she wanted, she had never taken a step onto the beach during the two years she had been working in the university.

It was definitely not because she did not like the sea breeze or the sunlight, and it seemed that a lot of time would be needed before they could take a vacation where she could earnestly enjoy herself. Rinko realized that it would likely take her another 10 or 20 years in a foreign country she did not know for her to forget about her past.

So, Rinko -who had thought that she would never step into her homeland Japan again, was now flying towards that place which was the connection to her abandoned past while looking outside the window with an indescribable feeling.

Four days ago, she had received a rather long mail that was sent from an unexpected person. She could have deleted it immediately and forgotten about it, but for some reason, Rinko had not done so. After spending less than an hour considering, she sent a reply back and had made a flight reservation. As she considered the last 2 years, she recognised that every day her thoughts had been frigid and she had been emotionally detached, and while she knew that this endeavour was completely futile, she had still decided to go...

She took a flight from Los Angeles back to Tokyo, stayed in a hotel in Narita, and then cautiously took this helicopter; Rinko sighed as she forced back this mystery she had been asking herself deep within her mind. Once I see what I need to see and hear what I need to hear, the answer will come naturally to me.

Indeed, the last time she went swimming was ten years ago, during the first year of college when she did not know anything. She invited the second-year senior, Kayaba Akihiko out and had borrowed money to buy a light automobile to drive to Enoshima. That naive 18 year old back then did not realize what kind of fate she was going to meet at all...

Rinko's mind wandered back from the musing on her distant past as the passenger beside her shouted to her with a voice that would not lose to the rotor's sound in volume,

"I SEE IT!"

The eyes from under the long, combed blond hair and sunglasses narrowed, and truly, on the other side of the curved glass window from this

transport, there was a small little black body on a corner of the immense ocean's surface that extended out.

"That's...the Ocean Turtle...?"

Rinko muttered as she saw the dazzling rainbow glow due to the reflection of the black solar panels. The co-pilot in a dark suit who had been on the seat as they flew answered quietly.

"That's right. There's still 10 minutes till arrival."

The helicopter flew approximately 250km in a long trip from Shinkiba, Tokyo to the surroundings of the large ocean research facility «Ocean Turtle», then got into landing position in a serviceable manner.

Rinko was inadvertently gobsmacked by the overly majestic sight. The term ship could not describe this completely. The large pyramid was standing steadfastly in the middle of the sea with a length that was 1.5 times that of the largest ship in the world, the Nimitz. The height was equivalent to a 25-storey building —she had investigated this data beforehand, but the difference between her imagination and reality was like the distance between the Earth and the moon.

The four-sided pyramid that was 400m long and 250m wide had black glowing panels that covered it like a shell. All of these panels were as large as the helicopter that they were currently in. How much did they invest in this thing here? Rinko could not tell. There was a rumor that in recent years, they had fully invested in the precious metals on the seabed off the Sagami Bay Coast, and after seeing that large body which defied common sense, one could tell that it was not simply a rumor.

The mechanized megafloat ocean construct looked like it was developed for the next generation of seabed oil extraction —that should be the case, but in fact, what was installed inside was a research facility for the next generation Full Dive Machine that might be called the «Soul Translator» one that could read people's soul -that was what she was told in the mail a week ago. Rinko herself was doubting this, but after personally arriving, she had no other choice but to trust the mail.

Why, why must the research with this brand new full-dive technology, the Brain Machine Interface be on the sea far from the Izu Islands? She had no idea what the reason behind it was at all, but in this black pyramid, there was a machine that combined the Nerve Gear that Kayaba Akihiko

designed and the Medi-cuboid Rinko improved on for medical treatment, and as she considered this, she suddenly realized...

The two years of her life overseas had merely numbed the wound within Rinko; it never healed completely. Well, in the end, she guessed that whatever she saw on this ship would either heal her wound -or rip it open and let the blood burst out.

Rinko slowly took a deep breath inside the helicopter that was slowly descending and stared at her fellow passenger, who nodded slightly through the sunglasses, and readied herself to get off.

Perhaps the pilot was a very skilled veteran, as the machine did not seem to sway much as it landed on the designated helipad on the roof of the Ocean Turtle's bridge. First, the man in the dark suit, who was the guide, alighted from the machine nimbly and saluted, then a man in a similar suit came running over.

Rinko then walked out of the hatch and nodded at the man who came over, thinking that it was great that she chose to wear jeans inside as she jumped from a 40cm height. The soles of her sports shoes landed on the artificial ground and it was hard to imagine that a ship could have such stability and safety.

Next, the other passenger who had dazzling blond hair walked out of the machine with her sunglasses on and arched her back. Rinko also stretched her arms wide to enjoy the air that had the scent of the tides.

The man who was waiting on the floating ship showed a serious look on his tanned face and immediately saluted Rinko.

"Professor Koujiro. Welcome to the Ocean Turtle. And this is?..."

The man looked over at the passenger, and Rinko nodded as she introduced.

"This is my assistant, Mayumi Reynolds."

"Nice to meet you."

The co-passenger spoke in fluent English and reached her hand out to clasp the hand in a somewhat clumsy manner. The man then introduced himself.

"I'm First Lieutenant Nakanishi, assigned to lead both of you. The attendants will deliver your luggage later on. Then, please come this way—"

The man waved his right hand to a flight of stairs that could be seen on the heliport and continued,

"Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka is waiting."

The air inside the bridge had the heat of summer and the salty tang of the Pacific Ocean, but after flowing through the elevator, the long passages and through the Ocean Turtle itself —the thick metal doors of the inside of the black pyramid, a cold and dry air blew at Rinko's face.

"Does the ship require such air-conditioning?"

She could not help but ask the First Lieutenant Nakanishi walking in front of her. The young Self-Defense Official turned around, nodded and said nonchalantly,

"Yes. There are many intricate machines, so there's a need to maintain the air temperature at around 23 degrees and humidity under 50%."

"Is the power provided solely using solar electricity?"

"Not at all. The solar panels can't even fulfill 10% of the energy required. The main machines use a pressurized water nuclear reactor for electricity."

"...I see."

Things are getting more and more complicated. Rinko shook her head slightly.

In the passage that had clear grey panels, the human shapes got more and more distorted. The information she briefly read through previously was limited, and though there were probably hundreds of researchers who moved in, it seemed that there was more than enough space with regards to the size of the vessel.

They turned right, left and so forth for another 200m, and right in front of a door that appeared suddenly in front of them, there was a man who was dressed in a deep blue uniform. One would assume that to be the uniform of a security company, but he immediately saluted after seeing the First

Lieutenant, and such an action was definitely not what an ordinary civilian would do.

The first lieutenant saluted in reply and said with a straightforward tone,

"Requesting permission for the researcher Professor Koujiro and her assistant Reynolds to enter area S3."

"Undergoing confirmation."

The security guard switched on the metallic terminal in his hand, then using his piercing stare and the monitor he scanned back and forth over Rinko's face. He nodded, and then looked over at the assistant researcher behind Rinko, using his hand to scratch the tidy beard before moving it to the side of his mouth.

"I'm sorry, can you please take off those sunglasses?"

"I see."

The research assistant lifted her large sunglasses, and her bright blond hair and clear white skin were revealed. The security guard had to narrow his eyes at that dazzling countenance, and nodded again.

"Confirmed. Please."

Hou. Rinko showed a bitter smile and said to the First Lieutenant,

"That's quite the strict security considering that you're in the middle of the ocean."

"We've already cut down on the body check and other procedures. We only did checks on metals and explosives around 3 times."

As he answered, the man in the suit took out a disc from his chest pocket and put it into the plate beside the door, then used his right hand to press it into the sensor panel. A second later, the door opened with the sound of a motor, and the door leading to the central area of the Ocean Turtle slid open.

After breaking away from the thick doors, cooler air blew in, orange light shone in, and the slight moan of the machines echoed. Kan, kan, the footsteps echoed in the space within the ship that one could not imagine to be of that size, and the guide -the First Lieutenant Nakanishi realized this as he stopped in front of a certain door.

Looking up, a simple plate labelled 'Primary Control Room' was shown there.

Finally, we're now at the last remaining place left behind by Kayaba Akihiko. Rinko held her breath and watched the back of the Self-Defense Officer who was making the last safety check.

Is this the start to a new beginning—

On the other side of the door that slid aside heavily, a deep darkness surrounded her like a shroud, causing Rinko to be unable to move for the time being. No matter how much she rejected the darkness, no matter how repulsed she felt, she was forced to acquiesce.

"...Sensei."

The voice of the assistant from behind her caused her to regain her sensibility.

First Lieutenant Nakanishi walked into the dark room, took several steps, and turned around to look at Rinko. Upon closer inspection, the interior of the 'Primary Control Room' was not completely dark, and there were orange lights flashing on the floor.

Rinko took a large deep breath and moved her right foot forward in a determined manner. The assistant stepped in, and the door behind them closed.

They followed the markers on the floor as they moved between the large network of server machines, and after walking out of the valley of machines, Rinko widened her eyes in shock.

"......Eh.....!?"

She could not help but gasp. There was a large window on the wall in front of her through which she saw an unbelievable scene.

Streets... no, it might be a city. However, it did not look like a city in Japan. The buildings were all built with white stone, and there was a strange domed roof there. Though it seemed the buildings were all around 2 levels tall, they seemed to be very small, and this was due to being surrounded by the giant tree branches and leaves that grew all over the place.

The similarly white stone hewn roads formed several steps and arched bridges passed through the woods; and the people that were walking around —were obviously not people from modern times.

There was not a single man in a suit or a woman in mini-skirt. Everyone's aspect was dressed in middle-aged clothing, like a one-piece vest or a longcoat. There were also hair colors of all kinds -blond, brunette and black, and as one they stared at them. It would be hard to tell if they were Easterners or Westerners.

Where is this place? When did we move from the research ship to an underground world or some other world? Shocked, Rinko looked away, and at the end of the streets that stretched out into the distance, there was a pure white gigantic tower. The main tower was accompanied by four side towers, and extending out from the horizon was a distant blue sky that even the window could not contain.

Rinko took a few steps forward to see how tall the tower was that reached into the sky, and finally realized that the scene in front of her was not a window, but an image that was shown on a large monitor panel. Soon, the lights of the ceiling brightened, chasing away the darkness in the room.

"Welcome to the Ocean Turtle."

An unexpected voice came from the right side, and Rinko immediately moved her gaze.

There were the silhouettes of two men right in front of the mini-theater screen with the monitor panel, at the console that had keyboards, sub-monitors and many other things.

One of them was sitting on a chair with his back facing everyone, typing away at the keyboard in a relaxed manner. However, the other man that was at the edge of the console immediately narrowed his eyes through his glasses the moment his eyes met Rinko's.

It was a smile she had seen many times before, an easy to approach smile that was hard to read into. This was the Self-Defense Officer who was sent to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka Seijirou, but—

"...What's with that attire."

What replaced a greeting for the duo who had not met in two years was a frown from Rinko as she enquired. First Lieutenant Nakanishi who was in a suit immediately exchanged salutes with Kikuoka Seijirou, who in turn got up. He was dressed in a blue yukata with Kurume rice patterns, a kaku obi tied around it, and wooden clogs under his bare feet.

"I'll take my leave then."

First Lieutenant Nakanishi saluted Rinko and left -once again the sounds of the doors sliding shut could be heard. Kikuoka, who was still standing, leisurely leaned on the consoles, and explained in a husky impassive voice,

"But I still have to stay on this ocean for another month. I can't just continue to wear a uniform like that."

He opened his arms wide and smiled.

"—Professor Koujiro, Miss Reynolds, it's been a long journey. I'm really glad that you would come to RATH, and that our invitations have proved their worth."

"Well, since we're here, we'll have to intrude on you, though we can't guarantee that we can be helpful."

Rinko nodded back, and the assistant beside her greeted him in the same manner as well. Kikuoka's eyebrows curled up as his gaze remained on the luxurious blond hair of the assistant, and immediately smiled.

"You are quintessential to this plan no matter what, the last person amongst the trio I felt would be part of this. Finally, the three of you are all gathered in the belly of this turtle."

"Oh, I see... one of them must be you, Higa-kun."

Rinko said so, and the second guy who had his back facing them up till now stopped his hands and turned the chair around.

He was about as tall as Kikuoka, but looked a lot shorter. His whitened hair was standing like a hill of swords, and he was wearing round rimmed spectacles that did not look too elegant. His attire of a T-shirt was faded in color, the three-quarter length jeans and the sneakers with damaged soles made him look no different from his time in university.

Higa Takeru, someone she had not met in 5, 6 years, showed a sheepish smile on his boyish face that matched his body build, and said,

"That's me. As the last student of the Shigemura lab, if I don't inherit the will of my mentors, who will?"

"Really...you're the same as ever."

The Shigemura lab in the Touto University Electrical and Electronic Engineering had two prodigious figures, Kayaba Akihiko and Sugou Nobuyuki, and Higa was under the shadows of those two like an existence in hiding. When was he involved in such a classified grand-scale plan? Rinko thought as she reached her hand out to hold her past protégé's hand.

"...Then? Who's the third person?"

She again asked after the third person, but the Self-Defense Officer showed that enigmatic-like smile that never changed and shook his head slightly.

"Unfortunately, I can't introduce him for now. Don't worry, in a few days..."

"Then, I'll help you say the name aloud, Kikuoka-san."

—The one who spoke was not Rinko, but the 'assistant' who had been standing behind her quietly, like a shadow,

"What...!?"

You finally fell into the trap. Rinko gave such an expression as she saw Kikuoka widen his eyes in shock, and took a step back from her assistant.

The assistant stepped forward majestically, and used her right hand to take off the blond wig and the left hand to take off the large sunglasses. The hazel colored eyes stared right at Kikuoka as she said,

"Where did you hide Kirito-kun?"

An unfamiliar panic and shock ran through the Lieutenant Colonel as his disconcerted face rattled through various emotions and he continued to open and close his mouth, before finally whispering,

"...I thought the identity of the researcher should have been checked thoroughly through the California Technical Institute's database."

"Ehh, sensei and I had been searching the faces for a long time." Asuna the «Flash», Yuuki Asuna, used the identity of Rinko's assistant Mayumi Reynolds to disguise herself and sneak aboard the Ocean Turtle, and stared at Kikuoka straight in the eyes as she straightened herself and answered,

"We merely switched the photo of the database a week ago to mine. We do have someone who's very good in breaking through firewalls."

"On a side note, the real Mayumi is enjoying a sunbath in San Diego."

Rinko added as she smiled.

"Now, I suppose you do understand why I accepted your invitation, Kikuoka-san?"

"Ahh...I understand completely."

Kikuoka weakly shook his head as he rubbed his temples with his fingertips. Kuku, suddenly, Higa, who had been staring at them blankly, started laughing all of a sudden.

"See, that's—why I said, Kiku-san. That boy is the biggest security hole in this plan."

Four days ago, on the 1st of July, she had received mail in her private address with the sender being 'Yuuki Asuna'. It contained something that was able to move Rinko, who had been roving between her house and the school campus like a nomad, greatly.

Asuna wrote about the «Medicuboid» technology Rinko provided to the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare, and how the basic design of it was used to develop a monstrous machine called the Soul Translator, which the mysterious organization called RATH was operating.

The main aim to develop this machine that could connect to human souls was most likely to create the world's first bottom up Artificial Intelligence. The boy who was assisting in the experiment, the unconscious Kirigaya Kazuto, was abducted from the hospital, and the likely destination was probably the megafloat research ship Ocean Turtle that had just entered these waters. The suspected mastermind behind this was the civil servant who had deep relations with Kazuto since the SAO incident, Kikuoka Seijirou —these unbelievable words were at first glance what was written within.

"I found Professor Koujiro's private address from Kirito-kun's PC email address. Only you can give me the chance to bring me to Kirito-kun. Please lend me your strength—"

The mail ended just like that.

Rinko was deeply touched as she had the feeling that what Yuuki Asuna said was the truth. As for the reason why, about 1 year ago, Kikuoka Seijirou used his position as Lieutenant Colonel to invite her to a development project for the next generation of the Brain Machine Interface repeatedly.

Rinko lifted her head from the monitor, looked at the night scene of the city of Pasadena through the window of her condominium, and remembered the face of the boy called Kirigaya from before she left the country.

He had explained the illegal human experiment Sugou Nobuyuki did, finally adding on hesitantly about what he talked about with Kayaba Akihiko in the illusory real world, and the secret request for the «Cardinal System» kernel for some unknown intent.

After thinking about it, she realized that the high intensity and high output brain pulse scanner Kayaba Akihiko used to end his own life was the original design for the Medicuboid and the Soul Translator. So everything was linked together. Nothing changed. I suppose it was necessary for me to receive Yuuki Asuna's mail—?

A night later, Rinko made her decision and sent a reply agreeing to Asuna's request.

It was a dangerous gamble, but I suppose making my way here to the Pacific is worth seeing Kikuoka Seijirou's shocked look, Rinko smiled. She may have gotten the advantage over Kikuoka -who had been working

secretly since the SAO incident and always looked like he was in control of everything, but it was too early to relax.

"Then, since we're here, I suppose you understand everything now...don't you, Kikuoka-san? Why did you, a Self-Defense Officer, fake a low profile in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications to enter the VR world? What are you planning inside this large turtle? And...why did you kidnap Kirigaya-kun?"

Rinko fired one question after another, and Kikuoka could only shake his head and sigh hard as he showed a smile that was impossible to read.

"First, let me explain this misunderstanding that never happened in the first place...I did drag Kirito-kun into RATH through somewhat forceful means, and I am really sorry about that. But that was because we wanted to save him."

"...What do you mean?"

If Asuna had a sword at her waist, she would have placed her hand on the hilt. Her forceful countenance was palpable as she closed in.

"Kirito-kun was attacked by the fugitive in the "Death Gun" incident and fell into a coma. I knew of it on that day itself. His brain took a whole lot of damage due to low oxygen levels, and I am very certain that the level of damage could not be treated through modern medicine."

Asuna's face suddenly went stiff.

"Can't...be treated..."

"A portion of the neural cells inside the brain that form the network were wrecked. Even if he entered a hospital, no doctor could tell when he could wake up. It was possible that he might never wake up again...okay, you don't have to show such an expression, Asuna-kun. Didn't I say that if it were modern medicine?"

Kikuoka gave a 200% most serious expression as he continued,

"However, in this world, only RATH has the technology to heal Kirito-kun. It's the STL that you already know of, the Soul Translator. The dead brain cells can't be treated, but it is still possible to boost the regeneration of the brains neural network by reviving the Fluctlight through the STL. It's just a matter of time."

The strong right arm that reached out of the sleeve of the yukata pointed at the ceiling.

"Right now, Kirito-kun is connected to that main conduit of the full-scale STL. We couldn't do any delicate operations in our branch in Roppongi, so there was a need to come back here. Once the treatment ended and he regained consciousness, we would have explained everything to his family and Asuna-kun and sent him back to Tokyo properly."

After hearing that, Asuna's body suddenly swayed, and Rinko hurriedly reached her hands out to support her.

The girl who had shown amazing insight and the resolve to barge to the side of her beloved suddenly lost all her tenseness, as a large tear rolled down the side of her face. She wiped it off in a determined manner, and stood up once more.

"Then, is Kirito-kun alright? Can he still wake up?"

"Ahh, I can assure you of that. His treatment here definitely won't be inferior to any large hospital's. We even assigned a specialized custodian for him."

Asuna's strong stare that was trying to probe into Kikuoka's real intent relaxed after several seconds, and she nodded slightly.

"...I understand. I'll trust you for today."

Kikuoka heaved a sigh of relief and his shoulders relaxed the moment he heard that. Rinko took a step forward and asked,

"But why is Kirigaya-kun important in the development of the STL? Why must you abduct an ordinary high school student like him for this secret plan that had to be hidden in the middle of the ocean?"

Kikuoka exchanged glances with Higa, and shrugged his shoulders, Oh well...

"I'll have a lot of things to say if I have to explain that."

"It's alright. There's still a lot of time."

"...Since I have to explain everything, you will have to assist in the development as well, Professor Koujiro."

"I'll decide once I hear you out."

The Self-Defense Officer looked slightly peeved as he dramatically sighed again. He pulled out a small tube from his yukata sleeve, and as one they wondered what the item was which turned out to just be some cheap lemon sweets. He popped 2, 3 sweets into his mouth and then offered them to Rinko's group.

"Want some?"

"...No thanks."

"Very well... then, I suppose I can assume that both of you know the basics of the STL, right?"

Asuna nodded in affirmation.

"It is a machine that reads the human soul... «Fluctlight» and creates a virtual world that is completely identical to the real world."

"Fm. Then, what's the aim of this plan?"

"The development of a bottom-up...«Highly adaptive Artificial Intelligence»."

Higa whistled as the eyes under the round framed spectacles showed a look of admiration, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Amazing, Kirito-kun shouldn't have understood things to such an extent. How did you manage to investigate this deeply?"

Asuna looked over at Higa as if she was sizing him up, and said with a stiff tone,

"...I heard the term «Artificial Labile Intelligence» from Kirito-kun..."

"Haha, I see. Looks like it would be better for you to check on the confidentiality in Roppongi, Kiku-san."

Higa said with a grinning look on his face, and Kikuoka's frowning face looked away.

"I was already prepared that some level of information would be leaked to Kirito-kun. I considered that risk, but his assistance is quintessential. You should understand that... un, where were we? Oh, the highly adaptive Artificial Intelligence, right?" Kikuoka again popped a lemon sweet into the air and nimbly caught it with his mouth. The Lieutenant Colonel then continued in a lecturing tone,

"The bottom up-type AI is a replicated construct of our human consciousness, and it was thought for a long time to be a flight of fancy, a pipe dream. But though we call it a consciousness construct, we have no idea what kind of structure it has and how it was formed —it's just that we used the data provided by Koujiro-sensei and the highly interpretive and imaginative «Soul Translator» this Higa-kun invented, and finally managed to capture a human soul -a quantum field we call «Fluctlight», successfully. Since we managed to make it all the way here, we feel the success in the development of the bottom up AI is to be expected... Do you know why?"

"If you can read a human soul, you just need to clone it next... is that right?"

Rinko felt a slight chill as she said.

"Of course, though there is the question of the medium required to contain the soul copy..."

"Un, that's the case. The gate elements used in the past for quantum computer systems were not enough. Thus, this is the «Quantum Particle Gate Crystallization» that has had lots of funds invested into it, also commonly known as a «Lightcube». This construct that is 5 cm is made from Praseodymium that can store hundreds of millions of qubits. In other words... we have successfully cloned a human soul."

Rinko forced her hands into the pockets of her jeans to hide the chilly feeling on her fingers. Asuna, who was standing beside her, seemed to turn pale.

"...Then, the research is already successful, right? Why is there still a need to call us over."

She fearlessly exerted strength into her stomach as she asked that. Kikuoka exchanged glances with Higa again, showed a weak smile on the left side of his face, and slowly nodded.

"...Well, we did succeed in our soul cloning, but we did not realize our own folly. There's a large divide of incomprehension between a human clone and a real Artificial Intelligence... Higa-kun, show them that thing."

"Ehh—spare me already. It'll be really messy."

Higa shook his head unwillingly, but sighed thereafter and started operating the console unwillingly.

Suddenly, the screen that was showing the mysterious foreign country darkened.

"Then, loading copy module HG001."

Tan. Higa tapped the enter key -and there was a fractal light shining in the middle of the screen. The middle was nearly white, and the sharp outer boundary of the red light was flickering irregularly.

"...Is the sampling complete?"

An unexpected voice could be heard from the speakers above, shocking Rinko and Asuna. They heard Higa's own voice, but there was a rather melancholic feeling behind it, perhaps because of the thin metal.

Higa, who was sitting on the chair, took the flexible microphone on the console and answered the voice that was similar to his,

"Ahh, the sampling of the Artificial Fluctlight was completed without a hitch."

"I see. That's good then. But...what's going on? It's completely dark here. I can't move my body. Is the STL malfunctioning? Sorry, let me out of the machine."

"No...unfortunately, I can't do that."

"Oi oi, what now? What are you saying? Who are you? I've never heard your voice before."

Higa was giving off a cold sweat as he remained silent for a while, and then answered in a slow tone,

"I'm Higa. Higa Takeru."

"..."

The red light flared, and suddenly cringed back. After a moment of silence, the sharp extremities expanded as if they were resisting something.

"Damn bastard, what are you saying!? I'm Higa here! Let me out of the STL!"

"Calm down, don't get upset. This isn't like you."

At this point, Rinko finally understood the meaning of the scene in front of her.

Higa was talking to the clone of his own soul.

"Then, think about it calmly, try and recall. Your memory should be interrupted the moment you entered the STL to extract the Artificial Fluctlight clone."

"...So what? Of course that's the case. I was unconscious during the scan."

"You remember what you said before you entered the STL, right? If you don't feel your body when you wake up, and if there is darkness around you, it means you're a clone of Higa Takeru."

The light again shrank back like some sort of sea creature. The long silence continued for a while, then 2, 3 weak spikes reached out.

"...Impossible. There can't be such a thing. I'm not a clone, I'm the real Higa Takeru. I...I have my own memories. I remember everything from kindergarten, university until the time I got onto the Ocean Turtle..."

"That's true, but that's to be expected. We cloned the complete memories of the Artificial Fluctlight... as a clone, you are truly Higa Takeru. Therefore, you should have a superior intellect. Calm down and analyze the situation over and over again. Let's work hard to achieve our common aim."

"...Our...you're saying us?"

There was a highly emotional feeling within the metallic voice of the clone, and at that moment, Rinko's hands trembled mightily. She had never seen such a cruel and grotesque 'experiment' before.

"...No...no, I can't believe it. I'm the real Higa. What kind of experiment is this? It's alright now. Just let me out of here. Kiku-san...are you there? Don't play any disgusting games now and let me out."

On hearing that, Kikuoka showed a melancholy expression, bent down, and brought his mouth to the microphone.

"...It's me, Higa-kun. No... I should be calling you HG 001. Unfortunately, the fact is that you really are a clone. You took many instructions before the scan, talked with me and the other technicians, and you should have been mentally prepared to emerge as a clone. You entered the STL with that belief in the possibility."

"But... but... no... NO ONE TOLD ME IT WOULD BE LIKE THIS!!!"

The shrill voice of the clone rang through the control room.

"I...I'M ME! IF I WERE CLONED, YOU COULD HAVE GIVEN ME THE REALITY OF BEING A CLONE... SUCH A THING... SUCH A THING IS TOO MUCH... NO... LET ME OUT!! LET ME OUT OF HERE!!"

"Calm down. Remain calm. The error correction function of the Light Cube is not as great as that of the brain's. You should know the dangers of losing your cool when thinking."

"I'M PERFECT!! I'M HIGA TAKERU! IF THAT'S THE CASE, HOW ABOUT I START A PI RECITING CONTEST WITH THAT FAKE!? OI, LET'S START! 3.1415926535897932....."

The red light expanded, dissipating from the screen and disappeared from the center. A small sound resonated as the microphone went silent.

Higa Takeru sighed long and hard again, weakly pressed the key on the console, and declared,

"It collapsed. 4 minutes and 27 seconds."

After hearing that mumble, Rinko gradually released her tightly clenched fists, and her palms were drenched in an icy cold sweat.

Asuna used her right hand to cup her mouth the moment she saw the collapse. Kikuoka, who detected that, kicked an adjacent empty chair with castor wheels from underneath the console gently over to them. The pale-stricken Asuna immediately took it and sat on it.

"Are you alright?"

Upon hearing that, the girl lifted her head and nodded firmly.

"Ehh...sorry, I'm alright."

"Don't force yourself. It's better to close your eyes for a while."

Rinko put her hands on Asuna's shoulders, checked that she had calmed down, stared at Kikuoka's face again, and said,

"There has to be a limit to your vulgar tastes, Kikuoka-san."

"I'm sorry, but I suppose you can understand that I can't explain this without letting you see it."

The Self-Defense Officer shook his head, sighed and continued,

"This Higa-kun is a genius with an IQ of nearly 140. We made a clone of him and the clone could not take the realization that it was a clone. We made more than 10 Artificial Fluctlights, including mine, but the results were all the same. At an average of around 3 minutes, their train of logic would start to run rampant without exception."

"I normally won't call him out like that. I won't use the first person pronoun of 'ore'. I think you can understand, Rinko-sempai."

Higa Takeru showed a reluctant and fervent expression as he continued,

"That was already not a problem of understanding the abilities and mental state of a clone, but the structural flaws by using the Light Cube to completely clone an Artificial Fluctlight, or that's what I feel... —Koujiro-sempai, do you know the term «Brain Resonance»?"

"Eh? Brain resonance...I do remember that it has something to do with cloning techniques, but the details..."

"Well, it's a bizarre fantastical theory. If we can create a clone that's completely identical to the original, the magnetic fields created by both people's brains will create a resonance which is amplified like the feedback of a microphone, and both of them will be destabilized. I can't believe that easily —but if our human consciousness can't endure the fact that we are not unique existences , there may be such a possibility... well there, don't show such an aprehensive expression. If impossible, how about you try it, Rinko-sempai?"

"Definitely not."

Rinko felt intimidated as she immediately refused. Asuna, who had been sitting on the chair with her eyes closed, whispered in place of the silenced trio,

"...I suppose Kikuoka-san met her many times in ALO. The top-down-type AI Yui-chan said before... even she, who has a completely different construct from the human consciousness, is scared of being cloned. If some accident caused her backup copy to be activated and allowed to take action, they would most likely fight each other to destroy each other..."

"Heh, that's rather interesting. Very interesting."

Higa immediately pushed his glasses up and leaned forward.

"Kiku-san was the only one who saw her? That's too sneaky. Please allow me to meet her next time. Yes, I see... as expected, it's impossible to clone a developed intellect... or rather, the only possibility is if the intellect is undeveloped..."

"But that's..."

Rinko pondered for a while, opened her arms wide, and faced Kikuoka, saying,

"Leaving that aside, the cloning of a soul is really amazing, but you failed to attain the goal of your research, right? I don't know how much you spent, but using the country's funds only to produce such results is..."

"No no no."

Kikuoka smiled bitterly and shook his head,

"If that was the outcome, my head would be already flying to the ceiling fan. And not just mine...several of the big shots in the Integrated Supervision Department would also be dead."

He played with the tube that contained the lemon sweets again, and after realizing that it was empty, took out a box of white milk sweets from his other sleeve and chewed on one.

"In fact, you can say that this is the start of the project. It's impossible to clone a developed soul, is that right... and if that won't work, what do you think we have to do, professor?"

"...Can you give me one of those?"

She took the milk sweet Kikuoka happily handed over, unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth. The soured sweet taste of yoghurt spread in her mouth. The American flavours were not to her tastes, but the sugar caused the mental fatigue to be washed away as she organized her thoughts.

"...How about you limit their memories? For example... delete personal information like names and addresses. If you don't know who you are, you can't create the dramatic hysteria which occurred just now..."

"As expected of you, sempai, to be able to think of something like that immediately."

Higa used his old university tone as he continued,

"We spent around a week brainstorming before we finally thought of that idea. We then tried to implement it, but... Artificial Fluctlights aren't as easy to manipulate as files in a calculator's OS. Simply put, their memories and abilities are entangled with each other. If we think about it, that's obvious since our abilities aren't inherent in us from the beginning, but are all learnt."

And then, Higa took out a memo pad on the table and used two fingers of his right hand to hold it.

"Learning is also a form of memory. Once you forget the memory of using a pair of scissors to cut paper for the first time, you will forget how to use the scissors... in other words, deleting memories that are a part of growing up will cause the related ability to be gone. The tragic state of such a clone is something a developed clone can't compare to. Also, wanna look?"

"No...no need for that, thanks."

Rinko hurriedly shook her head to refuse.

"Then... the memories and abilities will disappear no matter what, so how about learning from the beginning? No...that's not realistic. It would take too long."

"Ehh, that's the case. Besides, learning basic abilities like language and calculations are more difficult for us adults who have less room to develop our brains to learn. I've been trying to learn Korean, and I have been learning their systemic language for who knows how many years... afterall, the process of learning is a development of a neural network like that of a quantum computer... in other words, it means that the efficiency will drop increasingly as it evolves further from it's state of 'birth'."

"Then, memories... aren't just limited in terms of data, but also by thoughts and logic? Can the STL even do such a thing...?"

"If it wants to do so, I don't think there's anything it can't do. It's just that we have to account for the amount of time we need to analyze the Artificial Fluctlight in qubits that amounts to billions, determining what functions each individual qubit has. A few years...decades, we don't know how long.

But... there's a more direct and simple method this uncle here thought of. I guess it's an idea us researchers can't think of..."

Rinko blinked and stared at Kikuoka, who had his waist leaning against the console. The poker face looked rather calm, and it was still impossible to read this person's mind.

"...A simple method...?"

Even after thinking hard, she couldn't think of it, and just as she was about to surrender by asking him, *GATAN*, Asuna, who was on the chair slightly further away, stood up as if she had jumped.

"Do...don't tell me, you all, did such a horrifying thing..."

Her face was still rather pale, but her eyes regained their adamant glow. The beauty that far exceeded that of a normal Japanese showed an intense rage as Asuna stared right at the Self-Defense Officer.

"...You...you cloned the soul of newborn babies? To get flawless Fluctlights that had nothing learned?"

"You have really amazing perception. You and Kirito-kun both did clear SAO... the hero who beat that Kayaba Akihiko. I suppose it would be disrespectful of me to say this, wouldn't it?"

Kikuoka continued to smile as he showed an expression of pure admiration.

Rinko's heart suddenly ached the moment she unexpectedly heard Kayaba's name.

After knowing Asuna for merely a few days, Rinko had a very good impression on her. Strictly put, Asuna had the right to lecture, curse and judge Rinko, and even after hiding a lot of things, Rinko still helped Kayaba Akihiko in his dreadful plot, causing Asuna to be trapped in that cruel death game for 2 years.

However, neither Asuna nor Kirigaya Kazuto, who met her a long time ago, ever blamed Rinko. It was as if they were saying that it was bound to happen.

In that case, did Asuna think that this «RATH incident» is definitely something that would occur? —Rinko continued to stare forward as she inadvertently thought that, and Asuna took a step towards Kikuoka again.

"Do you think... the Self-Defense Force, the country can do whatever they want? Placing their goals as the priority?"

"How can that be?"

Kikuoka looked like he was greatly hurt as he shook his head hard.

"It was really too much of us to abduct Kirito-kun, but at that moment, I could not tell all our secrets to Asuna-kun and Kirito-kun's family. We used our connections with the National Defense Medical College hospital to transport Kirito-kun to the Ocean Turtle, and even if we had to fight for every moment and we did have to use extreme means to quickly get him treated in the STL here. I do like him a lot."

The Lieutenant Colonel paused, showing what might be an innocent smile, pushed his black-framed glasses back and continued,

"...On the other hand, I am trying my best to maintain law and order, compared to many research enterprises and countries in the world. It's all the same whether you agree with it right now or not. Of course, we obtained permission from the parents of the newborns to use the STL to scan their Fluctlight, and gave them ample thanks. The branch office in Roppongi was prepared for that... it is similar to an obstetric hospital."

"But you didn't explain everything to their parents, right? About what kind of machine the STL is."

"Ahh... it's true that we only said that we were obtaining brainwave samples... but that can't be considered a lie. Fluctlights are electric waves inside the brain."

"That's just making excuses. That's similar to extracting DNA from kids who don't know anything and cloning them."

At this moment, Higa, who had kept quiet, unexpectedly raised his arms to do a large timeout sign to Kikuoka.

"That's really a little too much, Kiku-san. I feel that there's a question of morality in secretly cloning newborn Fluctlights. But...Yuuki-san? Your understanding is a little mistaken. The Fluctlights don't have any physical differences in them like genes, especially when they're born."

He nudged the edge of his silver-framed glasses in that supervisor-like manner, seemingly looking around for a choice of words.

"Let's see...how about I explain this. For example, a manufacturer produces the same model of computer, and when it's produced, the specifications and appearances are all the same. However, once they end up in the users' hands, it can be said that they will be changed into something completely different in half a year, or one year. It's the same for human Fluctlights. In the end, we managed to clone Artificial Fluctlights out of 12 children, but after comparing them with each other, we found that the brain capacity was no different. About 99.98% of them were of completely identical constructs, and the 0.02% difference can be said to be the accumulated memories they have gained since they were born. In other words, the human thinking ability and personalities are all determined once they're born. The theory that abilities and personalities are inherited by genetics are completely repudiated. I really want to pierce holes all over this fatal flaw the eugenics believers believe in."

"You can poke holes in it once the plan is complete."

Kikuoka said with a seemingly tired expression.

"Anyway, Higa-kun has already explained this. In conclusion, a newborn Fluctlight clone does not have a specified personality from the cloning. Thus, if we cautiously eliminate the 0.02% difference from the 12 samples, what we get is what we call,"

His arms looked like they were bearing something very important—

"«Spiritual Prototype»... «Soul Archetype»."

"...You just thought of such an exaggerated term. In other words, that's the 'self' in Jung's Psychology, right?"

Kikuoka could only give a wry smile in response to Rinko's question, and shrugged.

"No no, I don't really want to explain it in details. That's just an explanation on the workings. Yes... the Spiritual Prototype all humans have can be considered as a CPU core, I suppose that is a way to explain it. When humans grow, the core will have all sorts of processes and memories installed until the structure of the core changes... it's not enough for us to put that «completed item» type of basic clone into the Light Cube when we're looking for a «Highly Adaptive Artificial Intelligence». We just showed an example to you before. Then, if we clone the Spiritual Prototype into the Light Cube right from the beginning... into the virtual world and let it grow, consider what would happen."

"But..."

Asuna did not look like she understood. Rinko put her hand on Asuna's shoulder to get her to sit down, and interjected,

"Let it grow. Even if you say that, it's different from plants and pets, right? It's the same with human children, that Spiritual Prototype. Then, I suppose there's a need for the virtual world to be extremely vast, an imitation that is of a level equal to current society... can you actually do such a thing?"

"Impossible."

Sighing, Kikuoka admitted.

"It's a virtual world created by the STL. It's different from the VR worlds we had in the past in that there's no need for 3D objects, but it's still difficult to use a complex and exotic modern society to produce it —do you remember a character in a movie before you were born, Asuna-kun? There was a given situation where a man's life was filmed as a movie and aired from his birth. The immaculate set that was built in the large domed city was populated with hundreds of temporary actors, all for a male protagonist who was unaware that he was one... in a situation that was created for this. However, that man grew up, learned from this world, found various peculiarities in this world and finally realized the truth..." [1]

"I saw it. I liked the movie quite a bit."

Rinko said, and Asuna indicated her agreement. Kikuoka nodded and continued,

"In other words...if we want complete processing of the world, there is necessary information we have to include... the world is a huge round body, and there might be many countries in it or something like that. We will try not to cause a misunderstanding in the humans growing up in the simulation that might cause them to feel out of place and get into trouble. Even the STL can't completely replicate the virtual world."

"Then, how about you bring the civilization level of the simulation back to a past era? During the time humans discovered science and philosophy, when they remained in that age from birth till death... if that happens, wouldn't your aim be to let the Spiritual Prototypes develop?"

"Un, that might be a roundabout method, and would need a lot of time for that... in the STL, firstly, if it's like Professor Koujiro assumed, we would try

to nurture the first generation of AI under certain conditions. To put it specifically, it would be a small Japanese village in the 16th century, however..."

At this moment, Kikuoka paused and shrugged, Higa then spoke up,

"This isn't as easy as you imagine it to be. We're complete amateurs to the culture and social norms during that era. We knew that a large amount of data would be necessary in order to build a home, and we had to huddle our heads together and think before we finally did. It was simple, there was no need to recreate the middle ages. We understood that a limited terrain and customs would bring about different settings that we can then adjust however we want, and all the troublesome issues can be resolved by the term 'magic'. Such a world itself is like a range, in that familiar network world Asuna-kun and Kirigaya-kun are familiar with."

"A VRMMO world."

Higa stared at Asuna, who whispered in a hoarse voice, and snapped his fingers.

"I actually went around playing them, though I can say that I keep hitting walls. However, even though I don't know who created it, I hear that they even have free packages to create new such games?"

"...!"

Higa was talking about «The Seed»... Kayaba Akihiko's work, the kernel version of the Cardinal System that Kirigaya Kazuto realized. Rinko took a gasp of cold air as she immediately comprehended this, but it seemed that Higa and Kikuoka did not realize where that program originated from.

Immediately, Rinko realized that there was still something secretive about that incident, and pretended not to know anything as she touched Asuna's shoulders with her fingers. It seemed that Asuna received what she wanted to say as she wordlessly shook her head.

Higa did not realize something was wrong with the duo as he continued with an open-minded tone,

"If we create a virtual world within the STL main frame, we won't need any 3D data. But in that case, it would be too uninteresting to create the model data from the surveillance monitor. That's why we hurried and downloaded The Seed and used the editor that came with it to frantically create the

village and surrounding landscape before using the visual mnemonics of the STL to transfer it."

"Is that so... in other words, that world became a double construct, right? The lower priority server operates through the VR world with a common data exchange, while the upper priority STL main frame operates through a specially-designed VR world. So what happens if we swap both of them... how about that?"

Yes, Higa nodded, and another question popped up before he could think.

"...Then, what if we don't use the STL for the lower priority server but dive in with the AmuSphere, can it work?"

"Erm... well, theoretically, it is possible, but the frequencies have to be lowered by twofold... the visual mnemonic and the polygon data aren't encompassed..."

Higa started to stutter, and Kikuoka rubbed his hands as he took over,

"Anyway, after many setbacks, we finally managed to complete our first milestone."

The Self-Defense Officer seemed to be reminiscing on his own past as his gaze wavered in the air.

"The first village we made had 16 Spiritual Prototypes in two farming families... in other words, we let the AI children grow to the age of 18."

"Wa, wa, grow up... who were the parents who raised them? Don't tell me it's an existing AI?"

"We discussed that before, and no matter how many capabilities the AI in The Seed has, it's impossible to raise the children using it. The first generation parents were humans, four male and female technicians acted as their parents and spent 18 years in the STL. Though the memories from within were eliminated -it couldn't be helped as part of the experiment, so we could only bear with that. The reward money we gave wasn't enough."

"No, but it seemed that they were unexpectedly enjoying it."

Rinko stared blankly at the faces of Kikuoka and Higa who were chatting away leisurely, and finally squeezed out words from her mouth.

"18 years...? I heard that the Soul Translator has a subjective time acceleration function... how much would that be in the real world?"

"About a week."

The immediate answer shocked her again. 18 years had approximately 940 weeks, which means that the STL time acceleration function was shockingly at approximately 1000 times.

"Won't... there be problems if the human brain is accelerated to 1000 times the normal processing rate?"

"The STL is not connected to the human brain, but the quantum particles that form the consciousness. We let the electric signals trigger the neurons in the neurotransmitters resulting in various biological phenomenon, allowing them to accelerate. In other words, theoretically, you can assume that the time required to think has more or less accelerated, and there won't be any damage to the brain."

"In other words, there's no upward limit...?"

Rinko had some simple prior knowledge about the Soul Translator time acceleration function, but did not know the exact number, and could only try her best to understand, speechless.

Up until now, she had always thought that the greatest function of the STL was to copy a human soul, but the shock that came with the time acceleration function was no less than before. That was because the possibility of theoretically increasing the work efficiency in virtual space was enough to shock her.

"However... there are still problems we haven't confirmed yet, so the current maximum limit is around 1,500."

Rinko's mind was numb because of the shock, but was calmed down by Higa Takeru's depressed expression.

"Problems?"

"There were suggestions such as whether the soul has its own lifespan compared to the brain that is part of the body system..."

Rinko could not understand immediately as she tilted her head to think. Higa stared at Kikuoka, giving a look that said 'can I continue from this?'

The Self-Defense Officer immediately looked as if the milk sweet in his mouth suddenly became bitter, and promptly said,

"Well, we still haven't gotten out of the hypothesis stage. Simply put, the quantum computer we call «Artificial FluctLights» have limited capacity, and if we pass the limit, the construct will degrade... We haven't tested it out, so we can't explain it definitively, but we set a FLA maximum limit for safety purposes."

"...In other words, the body has aged for many years while externally less than a week has passed on the outside? Won't the time acceleration function be useless now? Is there no other way to avoid such a phenomenon?"

Rinko could not help but ask as she showed the inquisitive nature of a researcher, and this time, Higa showed a depressed expression.

"Erm, well, theoretically... it's not like we've never had such fantasies ourselves. We have thought of making a portable STL device, and using that device to store the memories during the acceleration into an external device so that the capacity of the Fluctlight will not run out. However, it's definitely impossible to shrink the STL like that. Even if we could find a way for that, there's still a scary problem of losing memories of the acceleration after we remove the portable device."

"...It's basically a dream that surpasses fantasy. Overclocking the brain without using external memory... I would want to make that happen if I'm a test subject too."

Rinko shook her head about as she muttered, and redirected her thoughts that were off tangent back on topic,

"Anyway, about that, there currently is no method to avoid the issue of capacity oppression... in that case... wa, wait a moment. Kikuoka-kun, didn't you just say that the technicians stayed inside the STL for 18 years to raise the Spiritual Prototypes? What happened to their Fluctlights? Has their intellectual ability been retarded by 18 years?"

"No, no, it's not like that... probably."

Probably? Rinko stared at Kikuoka, but he nonchalantly ignored her stare as he continued to explain,

"As for the overall capacity of the Fluctlights, if we estimate at the pace at which it runs out, our «Soul's Life» is about 150 years long. In other words, if we can remain completely healthy, and with luck our brain avoid all sorts of diseases, it could be said that our intellect can be maintained for a maximum of approximately 150 years. Of course, it's impossible as it's improbable for us to live that long. If we take ample safety precautions, we can assume that it's fine for us to spend 30 years inside the STL."

"And in a century from now, there won't be a groundbreaking technology developed that can extend our lifespans..."

Rinko interjected with sarcasm, but Kikuoka did not mind as he answered,

"Even if we develop such a technology, I suspect that we won't gain favors that's any different from other civilians. Well, we've confirmed the lifespan of the souls, so we can now continue our topic. Thanks to the volunteer work the 4 technicians offered, the pride we have in creating the 16 young people who grew quickly... for simplicity sake, we'll call them «Artificial Fluctlights», should be somewhat satisfactory. They all obtained the ability of language —of course, we're talking about Japanese here —and basic calculation ability to maintain their other thought processes, and were living a rather exciting life in the virtual world we created. They were definitely good kids... very obedient to their parents, woke up early in the morning to get water, chopped wood, farmed... some of them were honest, some of them liked to show off their personalities, and were basically kind and friendly."

Kikuoka, who smiled as he said that, showed a somewhat troubled expression on his lips, or perhaps that was just her imagination?

"They grew up... both families had four boys and four girls, brothers and sisters to each other, and they all fell in love. Thus, once we determined that they were old enough to raise their own children, the first phase of the experiment ended, and the 16 young people became eight couples as they had their own families and went off living independently. The four technicians who were their parents all 'died' of an epidemic one after another and were released from the STL. The 18 years of memories they had were completely blocked, and their memories reverted to those they had a week ago just before they entered the STL. They started crying when they saw their children crying at their funerals from the external monitor."

"That was really a great scene..."

Kikuoka and Higa nodded at each other calmly, and Rinko pretended to cough lightly to prompt them to continue,

"...And then, after the human technicians logged out, there was no need to worry about the FLA rate, so we increased the time inside to 5,000 times the rate of current reality. The eight couples all had ten children each, Spiritual Prototypes, and they were all raised. These children then quickly grew into adults and formed into families, and soon gradually replacing the NPCs that acted as villagers, finally forming villages with only Artificial Fluctlights. As the era changed, their descendants continued to multiply... in the three weeks of reality, the inside world has spent 300 years of simulation, and we finally formed a large society of 80,000 people."

"80,000...!?"

Rinko could not help but utter aloud. After moving her lips for who knew how many times, she finally managed to project suitable words from between her lips.

"...Then... that's already more of a simulation of a civilization than an Artificial Intelligence inception."

"Yes, but in a certain sense, it's to be expected why such a thing happened. Humans are creatures who conform to society... and they can only grow by building relationships with others. During the 300 years, the Artificial Fluctlights expanded out from a small village and occupied the vast range we had set completely. They managed to build up an outstanding central government structure without a single bloody war, and there is even religion... I suppose that's the reasoning they used to explain all aspects of the system to the children, they did not use science, but god. Higa-kun, show the full map on the monitor."

Higa nodded in agreement, and immediately worked on the console. The large monitor that had shown the disgusting experiment before now showed a detailed map of an aerial photograph.

Of course, Japan and the rest of the world are different from that country.

The ocean did not exist at all, and the round shaped flatlands were all surrounded by a tall mountain range. There were many stretches of forests and grasslands, as well as many rivers and lakes. It looked like a very fertile land. Looking at the scale of the map below, the flatlands that were surrounded by the mountains seemed to be around 1,500km in diameter, and the size was about 8 times that of Honshu, Japan.

"Just 80,000 people in such a large space? That is quite the sparse population."

"Or rather, Japan itself is abnormal."

Higa chuckled at Rinko and stretched his hand out for the mouse, pointing it at the middle of the map and circling around it.

"The area around here is the capital, 20,000 in population. Perhaps we might not feel that it's anything much, but it's an outstanding city. The government institute which the Artificial Fluctlights call the «Axiom Church» exists here, and is ruled by the «Priests». Their influence is rather impressive, and there have been no wars happening— at this point, we felt that the experiment itself has been basically a success. In this virtual world, the Artificial Fluctlights are growing with the same level of intellect as humans. We were happy enough to enter the next phase that could meet our aim, the growth of the «Highly Adaptive Artificial Intelligence», but..."

"We finally found a serious problem."

Kikuoka stared at the monitor, and then said,

"...There weren't any problems in what you have heard up till now, correct?"

"I suppose you can say... that something wrong happened in the place where nothing went wrong. This world is way too peaceful. Perhaps it's because it's too orderly and is working perfectly. We should have realized that it's strange based on how the sixteen children were all so obedient to their parents... it's not strange for humans to fight each other, or rather, it's part of nature. However, there have been no wars here, not even once, let alone killings. The rate of growth for the population is too fast, let's put it that way. The chance of diseases and natural disasters happening will basically be nonexistent, and humans won't die other than of old age..."

"It's like an ideal society."

Higa coldly snorted at Rinko's words and said,

"Is it really true that the «Mythical Utopia» was actually a Utopia?"

"...Well, if it wasn't, it can't be considered a legend... Did you not also see something spectacular in this virtual society?"

"Of course we didn't look, we just tried looking at our own reality."

The sound of the clogs landing on the floor echoed, and Kikuoka, who leapt off the console, turned to the large monitor and started explaining again,

"The Artificial Fluctlights should have the same desires as us, yet why won't wars happen... we investigated thoroughly into their lifestyles. We then found that in this world, they have a strict set of rules. It is the «Taboo Index» that the priests put all their efforts into building. In there, there is a clause forbidding killing. The same laws do exist in our world too, of course, but whether we abide by them or not can be seen through the daily news. The Fluctlights themselves actually obey it though... in an overly obedient manner. In other words... they can't break laws or rules. That is their innate nature."

"...Isn't that a good thing?"

Rinko gave a puzzled look as she saw the side of Kikuoka's grim face.

"Listening to this point, wouldn't they be more exceptional than us?"

"Well... you can put it that way. Higa-kun, can you bring the image back to «Centoria»?"

"Okay."

Higa tapped at the console keyboard, and the large monitor again displayed the image of the otherworldly city that was shown when Rinko's group entered. The white stone buildings were surrounded by large trees, and the people wearing simple and clean clothes were casually walking by in this other world.

"Ah... then, this is?"

Rinko was engrossed as she saw this, and could not help but ask. Higa nodded away in a slightly satisfied manner.

"Yes, this is the capital of the world the Artifical Fluctlights live in, «Centoria». Actually, it's exactly like what we're seeing. They're using the polygon visuals of the lower server, and the digital clarity is very low. The display speed is only at one-thousandth of their rate."

"Centoria...it even has a proper name. About the world they're born in, does it not have a name?"

"It does... I suppose. It isn't named by the Artificial Fluctlights though, but by the codename we used in the beginning stages of our planning that we left in there. The name of this world is called «Underworld»."

"Under...world."

It seemed to be a name taken from «Alice in Wonderland». Rinko herself had heard about it from Asuna, but she did not expect them to use the name for the internal world. It was likely that Higa and the rest did not name it using the original's «Underground World», but named it with the meaning of «The World of Reality at the Bottom». The beauty of the fantasy-like city shown on the monitor may be a form of paradise.

Kikuoka seemed to read Rinko's thoughts as he said,

"It's true that this city is nice. There was actually quite an evolution in technology since we started giving them simple wooden houses as farming houses. However... if I have to say it, this street here is too beautiful, too tidy. There's not a speck of litter, not even a robber, and of course, no cases of murder. These are all part of the strict rules of the «Integrity Church» that can be seen from afar, the reason why no one will ever break it."

"Then, what's wrong about that?"

She frowned as she wanted to ask again, but Kikuoka shut up for some reason, seemingly looking for a way to answer. Higa glanced aside unnaturally and did not seem to have any intention of talking.

What broke the silence in the large primary control room was Asuna who had been remaining silent. The high-school student who was the youngest here lowered her voice as she said calmly, restraining herself,

"In that case, Kikuoka-san and the rest will be troubled, Professor Rinko. That's because the final aim of this large plan isn't just to create a bottom-up Highly Adaptive Artificial Intelligence... but to create AIs that can kill enemy soldiers in war."

"What..."

The trio gave flabbergasted expressions, Asuna glanced past Rinko, Kikuoka and Higa wordlessly, and continued,

"As for me, before I arrived, I had wondered why Kikuoka-san... of the Self-Defense Force wanted to create an Artificial Intelligence of such a high level. A long time before, Kirito-kun and I deduced that Kikuoka-san was interested in VRMMO because he wanted to use that technology for the police's or Self-Defense Forces' training. That's why, as the creation of the Artificial Intelligence was part of it as well, we first assumed that it would be used for training against enemy forces. However... if we thought about it, training inside the VR world would have none of the dangers in reality, and they could just split the soldiers into groups for training. That is because we often went through such simulations as well."

She paused for a moment and looked around at the surrounding machines and the monitor in front of her.

"—And, the plan itself is too large for it to be merely for developing a program for training. Kikuoka-san, I have no idea when you thought of 'the next step', raising the AIs in the virtual world and using it for real wars."

After a moment of surprise, the face that was staring at the girl's clear eyes changed to an incomprehensible emotionless expression, as he smiled calmly,

"Since the beginning."

There was an incomprehensible iron-like toughness in the gentle voice,

"The research for integrating VR technology into military training was already prevalent before the Full-Dive technology was around, during the time of head mounted displays and motion sensors. The antiques the American army developed are still in the research headquarters in Ichigaya. Five years ago, during the time the Nerve Gear was developed, the Self-Defense Forces and the American army both used it to develop training programs, but after trying the SAO closed beta that happened afterwards, I changed my mind. This world, the technology had a much

bigger possibility. The concept of war had already changed right from the beginning...and then, at the end of that year, when the SAO incident happened, I voluntarily transferred over to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications to became part of the task force. I had been keeping myself concerned with the developments in this incident all for the sake of this plan. After spending 5 years, I've finally made it here."

"..."

The conversation had developed in a direction that no one had imagined, as Rinko could not say anything for the time being. She barely managed to clear up her confused thoughts and squeezed out words from her dry throat.

"...I was a primary school student during the Iraq war, and I still remember things clearly. There were mass reports of how the American army's unmanned jet fighters and mini-tank drones attacked the enemy. I suppose that's what you mean? It meant these weapons that had AIs in them were attacking on their own. You were thinking about that..."

"It's not just me. Every country had been researching this technology, especially America who have been pursuing this for many years. Although this might bring painful memories to you, Asuna-kun..."

Kikouka paused slightly, stared at Asuna, checking that she was still calm, and continued,

"...Sugou Noboyuki, who imprisoned you in the virtual world and used many SAO players as part of an experiment, wanted to sell the results of his research to American companies, do you remember? Grojean Micro Electronics that he made contact with was a leading enterprise in the VR realm, but was famous for doing illegal deals for the sake of using the VR technology for military purposes. The American army munitions industry has paid the most attention to developing the unmanned drones Professor Koujiro just mentioned. One of the notable ones is the flying aircraft —Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, or «UAV» for short."

Perhaps Higa was being too prepared as he wordlessly moved the mouse to switch the image on the monitor screen, and what was shown were small unmanned fighters with long, slender fuselages and several wings attached. The mechanical wings had guided missiles loaded underneath, and there was not a single window on the plane.

"These are the unmanned recon and assault fighter jets in the American army. It's small since there's no need for a cockpit, and allows it to be in a shape for stealth flight so that it can't be detected on the radar. The machines from the previous generations were all remote controlled from long distance with an operator manipulating foot pedals and joysticks as the plane flies, but this is different."

The moment he said this, he switched the image on the monitor, and this time, the image was of a soldier being the operator. The soldier was leaning back on a reclining seat and had his hands on the arm rests. Then, Rinko noticed a familiar cabled helmet on the head —the Nerve Gear was covering it. Looking closely, the paint job on the outside shell and some minor parts were different, but they were obviously of the same model.

Rinko glanced aside to see Asuna's frozen expression with her eyes wide open. She then turned around, and Kikuoka continued his explanation,

"Here, the operator is in a virtual cockpit. It's like he's really operating a machine by being immersed like this, and he can scout out the enemy forces and fire guided missiles at them. However, the problem is that we use electromagnetic waves to control them, and they are still relatively weak against the ECM... the Electronic Counter Measures. 10 years ago, the recon UAVs the American Army used to infiltrate a country in the Middle East were hit with interference, were forced to land, and were captured thereby causing what was a very tense situation that nearly started a war."

"Then, Artificial Intelligence...right? In order to let aircrafts fly on their own..."

Kikuoka turned his eyes away from the monitor, looked over at Rinko's group, and lightly nodded in agreement.

"The ultimate goal is to shoot down all human-piloted fighter jets in aerial dogfights. I suppose that there is a large possibility for the current Artificial Fluctlights to grow once we give them suitable programs to grow within. However, there is a large issue, and that is, how are they, who are soldiers without flesh, able to understand the concept of «war»... killing itself is evil, but it's a requirement to kill enemy soldiers in war; currently, the Artificial Fluctlights are unable to accept such a paradoxical thinking as there's not even a single example in their law."

The Self-Defense Officer pushed his glasses up, and frowned hard,

"—We set up an «Overload Experiment» in order to test out how obedient the residents of Underworld would be. To put it in details, we chose an isolated village, caused the crops and livestocks in the farms to die off to such an extent that the villagers would definitely be unable to last through the winter, creating a situation such that if the village was to survive, they would have to abandon a group of their villagers and ration food out to another group, thereby forcing people to disobey the Taboo Index rule of killing someone. However, what happened was... they chose to distribute their meager harvest to everyone in the villager, from the old to the young, and as a result everyone died of starvation when spring came. They were existences unable to break the laws and regulations for some reason, and the outcome was really tragic. In other words... if they are to be pilots carrying weapons, they have to know the first premise, 'killing is okay'. But what circumstances will allow them to develop this, even we can't imagine..."

The Self-Defense Officer folded his sturdy arms that were poking out from the sleeves of his yukata, and shook his head weakly.

Rinko could not imagine a scene where, in contrast to existing aircraft, groups of unmanned fighter jets in all sorts of strange shapes used missiles and machine guns to kill indiscriminately, whether they were soldiers or civilians. Her arms shuddered slightly as her hands continued to rub against each other.

"...You're not joking about that, right? Exactly why must you have AIs in such incredibly dangerous weapons? Although somewhat limited, can't you just do remote control from afar? Uun, speaking of which... I don't want to accept the existence of unmanned weapons themselves."

"Well, it's not like I don't understand that feeling. When I saw the American large caliber rifles on unmanned vehicles, I gave extreme thanks that I was not one of those who lived there. However... unmanned weapons are already a part of necessity in this age, and the advanced countries are unable to resist the demands of the times"

Kikuoka lifted his finger like a history teacher and continued,

"Then, let's use the largest military in the world, America for example. The actual death toll of soldiers during the Second World War for them was actually 400,000. Even though so many people died, President Roosevelt at that time was passionately supported by the people in the country, and spent 13 years, 4 terms in office at the highest authority until he died of a

stroke. Though I don't like the attitude during those times where 80 years ago, using the number of soldier deaths to determine the victory of an army was part of the spirit."

The second finger flicked up silently, maybe because of the strong fist.

"Then, during the Vietnam War, there was an anti-war movement started by the students, and President Johnson was prevented from running a second term. At that time, 60,000 people died in battle. As the flag of Anti-Communism was raised, soldiers were sent to the battlefield one after another and died —however, in the temporary peace that is now called the Cold War, the feelings of the people changed slightly... and then, this era ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. America, having lost the enemy called Communism, strode onto the stage called the war against terrorism in order to maintain the army munitions industry that was deeply ingrained into the country.

Kikuoka raised the third finger and continued on fluently,

"—But in that battlefield, there were no signs of the citizens accepting soldiers' deaths. During the Iraq War at the beginning of the century, American soldiers were sent over with around 4,000 of them dying and that number alone shook the support for the Bush Administration. Of course, not only due to this but also other factors, his presidential popularity declined. It could be said that it was to be expected when he supported the Republican candidate McCain lost to the Democrat Obama who promised to completely withdraw from Iraq —in other words..."

He put his hands down, took a short breath, and paused his long conclusion.

"Within that country it's no longer considered the era for humans to fight in wars, However, they have been unable to stop the allocation of money into this ample morsel called the defense budget. The future of war has thus been transformed into unmanned weapons vs people or unmanned weapons against unmanned weapons."

"...I can understand the American situation, but it's another thing whether we can accept this."

Rinko nodded slightly as she felt irritated by the sudden extraordinary thought of using unmanned weapons to carry out a war without injuries. She again stared at Kikuoka and questioned,

"But why do you as a Self-Defense Officer, follow behind this stupid arms race? Or is this «RATH» research started by the military?"

"HOW CAN THAT BE!?"

Kikuoka denied it with a rare loud voice, but immediately reverted back to his usual smile and opened his arms wide in an exaggerated manner.

"Or rather, it's more accurate to say that we're floating in the middle of the ocean to hide from the American Army. Any base on the mainland's in plain view of them, after all. —As for why I'm developing unmanned weapons at such a crazy rate... it's not exactly easy to explain the reason. It's like asking Kayaba-sensei about why he created SAO; though I suppose you wouldn't be satisfied with that, huh."

"Of course you can."

Rinko answered with a deadpan expression, and Kikuoka showed a large forced smile as he shrugged his shoulders,

"Pardon my rudeness for saying something I shouldn't have said. Yes... the biggest reason is that, currently in Japan, to put it simply, our defense technology is too weak"

"Defense...technology?"

"I suppose you can put it this way; the weapons are developed and produced from zero, but that is to be expected as no country exports weapons to Japan. It's the same for the manufacturers as well, since using the spending budget of the Self-Defense Forces to carry out deals would be completely meaningless. In the end, we had to buy the latest equipment from America and finally managed to carry out development together. But, to put it simply...the together here is just in name only, a one-sided thing."

The Self-Defense Officer adjusted the collar of his yukata, folded his arms, and continued explaining in a rather bitter tone,

"For example, the support fighter jets that we're currently equipped with now are developed together with America, but in fact, they have hidden their latest technology and obtained the advanced technology which Japan created. As for the weapons we bought, what kind of capabilities will they have? Our main latest fighter jets that we bought looked as if the software -the brains, had been removed. So the American army has given us

outdated technology and kept the good stuff... hm, I feel like an idiot saying these things."

Kikuoka grimaced again as he folded his legs on the console desk, shaking the clogs on his toes.

"In regards to this situation, a group of our Self-Defense Officers and a group of young technicians from small and medium sized defense-related manufacturers have already felt a strong sense of danger. Can we keep relying on America for the core of our defense technology? That sense of danger was the driving force behind RATH's creation, where we want to create Japan's own technology. That's all we hoped."

Even though Kikuoka's words sounds rather admirable, to what extent should they be accepted? Rinko thought as she stared deep into the dark eyes deep within the black-framed glasses. However, the Self-Defense Officer's eyes did not show anything at all, as if they were the black-framed glasses themselves.

Rinko looked away and stared at Higa Takeru who was sitting beside Kikuoka.

"...Is your motive in taking part in this plan the same as well, Higa-kun? I didn't know that you had such awareness about the National Defense."

"No."

Higa Takeru scratched his head shyly in response to Rinko's words,

"As for my motive - well, it's personal. I had a friend when I was a student in a Korean University, and he was deployed to Iraq for military service, only to be killed in a suicide bombing. Well... even if this world will have wars, I hope that humans won't die for such foolish reasons, I suppose."

"...But that Self-Defense Officer wanted to let unmanned weaponry become a technology only the Self-Defense Forces own, didn't he?"

"Ya, Kiku-san did say this before, that although having sole ownership of this technology for a long time is impossible, he understands it will not be exclusively for this purpose so we can think of how to take the lead... and that's how it is."

The Self-Defense Officer grimaced in regards to Higa's straightforward words. At this moment, Asuna, who had been listening to the trio silently, said with a beautiful yet cold and clear voice,

"You never told the nice ideals of yours to Kirito-kun, did you?"

"...Why would you think so?"

Kikuoka tilted his head, and Asuna stared straight at him with an unwavering look.

"If you said it to Kirito-kun, he would definitely not assist you. There is an important flaw in your words."

"...And that is?"

"The rights of Artificial Intelligence."

On hearing those words, Kikuoka twitched his eyebrows and frowned.

"...No, it's true that we never said what we said here to Kirito-kun, but it's simply because we never had such a chance. He is a staunch realist too, right? If not, it would have been impossible for him to clear SAO."

"You still don't understand. If it's Kirito-kun, once he realizes the true situation of Underworld, he will definitely be furious at the operator. To him, wherever the place is, it's reality for him. He would not think it a virtual world with virtual life... that's why he cleared SAO."

"I don't understand. Artificial Fluctlights don't have bodies of flesh. Why do you say those aren't false lives?"

Asuna's eyes were sorrowful... no, a tiny glint showed that she felt the adults in front of her were really pitiful as she slowly continued,

"...Even if I say so, you'll likely be unable to understand... in a town on the 56th level of Aincrad, I said the exact same thing you said to him. There was a boss monster we had to beat no matter what, and in order to defeat it, we planned to use the NPCs... the villagers controlled by the AI to fight. But Kirito-kun declared that it should absolutely not be done, that NPCs were alive and there should be other means. The people in my guild laughed... but in the end, he was right. Even if they're Artificial Fluctlights, copies of media that were mass produced, Kirito-kun will never help if they're to be used as tools of wars and have to kill each other, definitely."

"—It's not like I don't understand what you're trying to say. It's true that Artificial Fluctlights have the same level of thinking ability as us humans. In that aspect, it's true that they're alive. However, this is a question of

priority. To me, the lives of hundreds of thousands of Artificial Fluctlights versus the life of one Self-Defense Officer is less."

This is a debate that would never have an answer. Rinko thought. As for whether the Artificial Intelligence themselves have human rights —it would be a question that would never be concluded simply, even if a real bottom-up AI were released and the years of debate ended.

As for what she herself was thinking, Rinko herself was unclear. As a scientist, the realism within me states that cloned souls were not lives. But at the same time, what will that person think? What if it was that person who hoped for «a certain place that wasn't here», created it and never came back—?

Rinko broke the silence in this situation in order to drag her trail of thoughts back.

"Speaking of which, why is Kirigaya-kun a must in this? There's a risk of leaking your most classified information, so why him...?"

"—I see, we're having this conversation for explanatory purpose. I went off-topic and nearly forgot about what we were supposed to talk about."

Kikuoka looked like he was trying to escape from Asuna's extremely magnetic stare as he smiled, coughed, and continued,

"Why is it that the residents of the Underworld can't disobey the Taboo Index... is it an issue with the construct of the Light Cube that contains the Fluctlights, or is there some reason in the nurturing? Let's repeat our discussion. If it were the former, there's a need to discuss redesigning the medium, and if it were the latter, we might be able to correct it. Thus, we tried an experiment. One of the technicians, a real human, had his memories fully blocked and became a young child again. We let him grow in the Underworld to see whether his actions would be similar to the Artificial Fluctlights."

"Do...doing such a thing, won't the brains of the test subjects be affected? If their lives are restarted... won't they be lacking in memories?"

"Not at all... the Fluctlights can endure memories of around 150 years, which I did say before, didn't I? As for why would such a large margin exists, we have no idea... according to the Bible, people during Noah's time could live for hundreds of years, so I suppose we know what they were talking about. First, even though we talk about growing up, we're just

letting him grow up to around ten years old, which will be enough for us to know if we can break through that Taboo Index. Of course, the memories generated from there will also be blocked, so when he returns back to reality, he'll be in the same state as before entering the STL."

"...Then, the results...?"

"We recruited eight staff members to be test subjects, let them dive into Underworld and let them grow up in all sorts of environments. In the end... the shocking thing was that not a single one broke the Taboo Index before they were ten. Rather, it was the opposite of what we thought... they were less lively than Artificial Fluctlights and did not like to go out. They did not show an interest in getting to know their surroundings. We deduced that that's because of a sense of discomfort."

"Sense of discomfort?"

"Even if we block all the memories from birth, it doesn't mean that we erased them completely. If that happens, they might never be able to return back to reality. Anyway, it's not about the «knowledge», but the «instinct» that represents how the body acts, preventing the researchers from getting used to Underworld. No matter how real it is, it is no different from virtual worlds created by The Seed. Once they entered, they could understand that it was slightly different from moving in reality. It was the same kind of discomfort as mine when I first used the Nerve Gear to test the closed beta of SAO."

"It's because of the sense of gravity."

Asuna simply said,

"Gravity...?"

"Unlike sight or hearing, part of the research on gravity and balance was a little late. That's because most of the signals rely on gravity to adjust our brains, so those who aren't used to it can't move as they please."

"Yes, that's what we are accustomed to."

Pa-tch, Kikuoka flicked his finger and agreed,

"If we want to repeat all sorts of experiments, the need to get used to moving inside the virtual world would be a must, and we finally realized that. It's not just an experiment of days or months, but years. I suppose

you understand now. I needed the person who's most used to the virtual world to help for this reason."

"—Hold on a moment."

Asuna again interrupted Kikuoka with a firm voice.

"Are you referring to the «Continuous three days of diving» Kirito-kun talked about? ...But Kirito-kun said to us before that the maximum FLA function rate is 3 times, so he spent 10 days inside. Did you lie to him? Was it really 10 years...?"

Kikuoka and Higa were hit with electrifying stares as they lowered their heads with alarmed expressions.

"Sorry, about that, it was an error on the Roppongi branch's side. That's because I gave instructions to hide information of the acceleration rate completely..."

"There's something worse than that! 10 years of Kirito-kun's soul lifespan was used for that. If his treatment fails because of this, I will definitely not forgive you."

"It's not really a reason, but Higa-kun and I had contributed to the experiment for more than 20 years —however, the 10 years Kirito-kun spent there was far less than the amount of Fluctlights the staff members all contributed."

"In other words, he did something that was against the Taboo Index when growing up in the Underworld?"

Rinko could not help but interject, and Kikuoka smiled as he shook his head hard,

"Strictly put, it's not like that, however, I can say that the results were more than I expected. From a young age, Kirito-kun displayed an unseen exuberance of curiosity and activity, that had many times verged on the edge of breaking the Taboo Index many times —of course, if his Fluctlight actually ended up breaking the Taboo Index, it indicates that the Artificial Fluctlights are structurally flawed, which I wouldn't be happy about. However, we continued to observe his actions and after he had spent around seven years or so inside... this Higa-kun here noticed a fact that's very interesting."

Higa interrupted Kikuoka's words and continued,

"Yes, I was originally against Kirigaya-kun taking part in the experiment, both morally and out of security, and once I realized that fact, I had to say that I was impressed by Kiku-san's wise insight. We digitalized the importance of several clauses in the Taboo Index and checked on every resident's chances of breaking the Taboo Index. The Artificial Fluctlights of the boy and girl who had been interacting with Kirigaya-kun... -or Kirito-kun, inside there had been increasing their Taboo Breaking Index."

"Eh...? That means..."

"In other words, Kirito-kun with his memories and personality in the real world sealed, was able to affect the actions of the Artificial Fluctlights around him. To put it in easier terms, his exuberance spread to others, or something like that."

Rinko detected that Asuna's lips was showing a slight smile on her lips after hearing Higa's description. Perhaps those words were easy for Asuna to understand.

"...Right now, as for why the Artificial Fluctlights won't disobey the rules, we can't completely discern the reason. It's likely due to the elements used to build the Light Cube, but we already felt that there's no need to take the job of analyzing it thoroughly as a priority. To us, we don't want to solve the problem completely, we just want one exception, a real highly adaptive Artificial Intelligence that has a concept of «Prioritizing Rules», and once we clone it, we should be able to get some reasons."

"I don't really like such thinking... but in the past, breakthroughs have been made through that method, I suppose?"

Exhaling slightly, Rinko asked Higa,

"Then, have you obtained that exception?"

"There is one that landed in our hands. That girl who was the closest existence to Kirito-kun finally disobeyed the Taboo Index before the experiment ended, and it was a very severe crime of «Intruding the Forbidden Zone». After inspecting the records, we found that there was another Artificial Fluctlight that died in the forbidden zone the girl saw. Most likely, she wanted to save him, and if I say so, that girl values other people's lives more than the Taboo Index. That's the adaptability we have been searching for. Well, it was completely different from actualizing a weapon; «breaking the ethics and killing someone» is really an ironic thing."

"...You said it once before, didn't you?"

"Ah —yes. Unfortunately... we could not hold tight onto the jewel that landed in our hands..."

Higa lowered his shoulders and continued to shake his head left and right,

"...As I just said, the time inside Underworld is passing at a shocking speed of 1,000 times the real world. It's not possible to monitor it from the outside in realtime, so we sliced what we recorded into many segments and slowly replayed them using many of our staff to watch them. During that though, there would definitely be a large lag as compared to the time inside. We stopped the server once we found out that the girl broke the Taboo Index and wanted to physically eject the Light Cube to preserve her Fluctlight... at that time, around two days had passed inside. Then, what was shocking was that the Integrity Church had brought the girl to Central within 2 days and applied some form of correction to the Fluctlight."

"Co...correction? You gave that much authority to the ones you're observing?"

"That shouldn't be the case... or probably not. The residents of the Underworld have some form of authority to maintain law and order, and those who are able to carry out the system limit that the high class residents called «Sacred Arts» are those priests of the Integrity Church, the ones with the highest authority. Maybe it's not just lifespan they can manipulate, but they found a backdoor to the system without us knowing...well, I'll read the data for further details later; «Alice»'s past and present Taboo Breaking Index."

"Alice...?"

Asuna suddenly lifted her head and muttered. Rinko started to understand the meaning of this term as well. It should be the one name worth mentioning from the acronyms of the «Highly Adaptive Artificial Intelligence» Kikuoka and Higa were pursuing.

Kikuoka seemed to detect their doubts as he nodded in agreement and said,

"That's right. That's the name of the girl in question who had been with Kirito-kun and the other boy. The names of all the residents of Underworld were all randomized pronunciation, so we were really shocked by this amazing coincidence when we knew that the girl's name was Alice. That's

because that's the name of the concept in the entire plan this organization RATH has."

"Concept?"

"the Highly Adaptive Artificial Intelligence Self-Existence, Artificial Labile Intelligence Cybernetic Existence. If we take the first letter from each word «A, L, I, C, E»... the aim of our research is to let the photon clouds sealed within the LightCube become «Alice». The staff called it «Alice-ing»."

The Lieutenant Colonel Kikuoka Seijirou still showed a smile that was hard to comprehend even as these secrets were known, and said,

"Welcome, to our «Project Alicization»."

Part 3

—You created so many unreasonable things.

Even though it was a machine made from the data she provided, Koujiro Rinko could only be as amazed as ever.

The neighboring room that was isolated by the thick glass wall had two giant rectangular objects that were nearly reaching the ceiling at the top. The outside was aluminum that was not dyed, and the dark grey silver glow gave it a much more mechanical feel. It was several times larger than the high-tech machine Medi-Cuboid that was used for medical treatment, let alone the Nerve Gear.

Of course, the logo of the manufacturer was there, just the simple English words «Soul Translator» on the side and the large number on the top. The machine on the left side had the number 4, while the right one had 5. I finally get to see the real «Soul Translator» Rinko stared at it for more than 10 seconds, frowned and muttered,

"4...this is the 4th machine...right, then the 5th machine there...?"

The numbers could only be explained in such a way, but the clean room on the other side of the glass wall had no such machines here. She tilted her head slightly and heard the soft explanation from the right side.

"Experimental model 1 is in the main office in Roppongi and is connected to the satellite. Models 2 and 3 are in the Ocean Turtle, but as you can see with the machines here, they're placed in the lower shafts. To put it...these

latest models 4 and 5 could not be kept there due to a lack of space and were sent out of the upper shafts, I should say."

The one who spoke was the one who brought Rinko and Asuna over. It was not Kikuoka, Higa nor First Lieutenant Nakanishi, nor was it a man this time. The pure white uniform covered the long and slender body, her footwear was low-heeled slippers, and her head had a nurse's cap—a female guardian.

For some inexplicable reasons, she wondered why there would be a guardian here in such a place, but after considering that this place was such a large ship, there would be a medical crew, and there would be such staff here.

The nurse had hair that was tied in three layers of braids and was wearing rimless glasses. The tablet terminal in her hand was quickly tapped and showed to Rinko. What was shown should be the layout map of the Ocean Turtle. She used her fingertip that had nice trimmed fingernails to draw on the large ship.

"The central area of the pyramid has a stabilizing pipe that's 20m in diameter and 100m tall called the «Main Shaft». This is the pillar that supports every floor in this ship and also the layer that protects important facilities. The insides are all the Control Systems of the ship itself, the backbone of the Alicization plan...the place where the 4 STLs and the main frame «Light Cube Cluster» is."

"Fuun...that's for the upper area, right? Then what about the lower areas?"

"It's a construct that's divided into top and bottom at the central area. The middle is a wall-like titanium compartment. What's above it is the upper shaft, while the bottom is the lower shaft. Right now, we're at the «Second Control Room» in the upper shaft. The staff calls it the «Sub-Con»."

"I see. So the first place we were brought to, the First Control room in the lower shaft is the «Main-Con», right?"

"That's an outstanding answer, Professor Koujiro."

Rinko gave a wry smile to the nurse who smiled as she said that, and turned to the left.

The girl who was standing there silently—Yuuki Asuna had her hands leaning on the glass wall, watching the 4th machine on the other side

intently. To be precise, it was a certain boy who was lying on a bed and attached to that 4th machine.

There were many monitor electrodes attached under the white patient gown, and there was a micro-injector attached to the left arm. The area above the shoulders were all covered by the STL and could not be seen, but Asuna realized that he was the Kirigaya Kazuto she had been looking for.

4
Soul Transfer

Asuna continued to stare at Kirito without noticing Rinko's stare, and her long eyebrows finally closed slightly as she whispered something silently. Tears welled up in her eyes, and swayed aside before it landed.

Rinko really wanted to comfort Asuna who was in such a state, and right before her—

"It's alright, Asuna-san. Kirigaya-kun will definitely come back."

The nurse with glasses said that with a slightly surprised tone. She walked beside Asuna, taking over Rinko who took a step back, and reached her hand out to the girl's shoulders. However, Asuna turned her body suddenly as if to dodge them and used her fingertips to wipe away her tears, answering with a taunting tone for some reason,

"Of course. But...why are you here, Aki-san?"

"Eh...? Both of you know each other?"

Rinko asked in a very puzzled manner, and Asuna nodded slightly,

"Un. This Aki-san here is a nurse working at the Chiyoda Hospital. As for why this person is at the waters off Izu Islands, I don't know."

"Of course, I'm here to take care of Kirigaya-kun."

"Then, what's your occupation? Or is it like Kikuoka-san? Are you also disguised as a nurse?"

The nurse called Aki never showed any signs of fear as she took Asuna's intense stare, and showed slight smile as she gently put down her shoulders.

"How can that be? I'm not like that oji-sama, I'm a real nurse. I do have national qualifications too. However, the school I graduated from was the «Tokyo Self-Defense Senior Nurse Academy»."

"...I can believe it somewhat."

Asuna nodded somewhat, and Rinko continued without any care.

"Well, I don't understand at all...who is this Aki-san in the end?"

"A real nurse, I suppose, but that's not all."

Asuna turned to face Rinko again and said fluently,

"If she's a nurse who graduated from the Nursing Academy that's affiliated to the Self-Defense Forces, she technically should be working in the Self-Defense Forces' Hospital. However, Aki-san was a nurse at the Chiyoda Hospital during the SAO incident, which means that this was Kikuoka-san doing...am I right?"

"That's an outstanding answer, Asuna-san."

Nurse Aki repeated what she said to Rinko as she smiled. Asuna continued to stare at the tall and skinny nurse before quipping,

"Also, there's also one more thing. I read through the data that those who enroll in Self-Defense Forces' Nursing Academy would be treated the same as recruits entering the army under the academy's promotion guidance. In that case, Aki-san is a nurse and also..."

Don't tell everyone. Nurse Aki said as she used her right hand to cover Asuna's mouth. She raised her hand to her head, bsh, got into a standard salute—

"PETTY OFFICER SECOND CLASS AKI NATSUMI! I SHALL PERSONALLY TAKE CARE OF KIRIGAYA-KUN'S LIFE!...there."

The nurse and Self-Defense Officer gave a final decisive wink, and Asuna stared at her face in a half-doubtful manner before sighing and lowering her head slightly, saying,

"Please take care of me."

She then again turned to look at the 4th STL machine that was separated from her by the glass wall, giving a strong yearning look at the boy that was lying on the gel bed that was 3m long,

"...You definitely must come back, Kirito-kun."

She muttered as each tear dripped, and Nurse Aki nodded heavily, this time putting her left hand on Asuna's shoulders.

"Of course. Even if this is the case, Kirito-kun's Fluctlight is actively working in the treatment process. The neural network has successfully regrown, and he should soon wake up. Also...that boy is the «hero» who cleared SAO, right?"

These words left a sharp pain in Rinko's chest. She took a deep breath, swallowed it, stood beside Asuna and stared at the large machine through the glass.

8pm.

Rinko lifted her head from the watch in her left hand and raised her right hand in a determined manner as she pressed on the metallic button that had the 'call' word engraved on it. Several seconds later, the speaker installed beside the door gave a simple answer,

"...Yes."

"It's me, Koujiro. Can I say some things to you for a moment?"

"Of course, I'm opening the door now."

As the voice rang, the internal phone panel's indicator changed from red to green, and with the sound of a motor, the door slid open.

Rinko entered the room, and Asuna, who was standing beside the bed, nodded slightly as she controlled the master control remote in her right hand. The door behind her shut, and a small locking sound could be heard.

The cabin was of a completely identical design to Rinko's room that was opposite the passageway. The space that was of 6 tatamis was formed by off-white resin, and there were only a fixed bed, and table, a sofa and a small terminal that could access the ship's network. First Lieutenant Nakanishi, who led both of them here, said 'this is a first class cabin'. Rinko could not help but imagine the luxurious passenger cabin of those cruisers, but it seemed that a personal room equipped with a personal bathroom was already a first class room.

However, Asuna's room was different from Rinko's room as there was a long and narrow window on the other side of the bed. In other words, this would be the outermost area of the Ocean Turtle, the area that was linked to the generator panel level. She deliberately took the elevator up to enjoy the beautiful ocean sunset from the window, but right now, only a pitch black darkness spread around, and unfortunately, the cloudy sky meant that stars could not be seen at all.

"Please do as you please. I don't mind."

Asuna said. Rinko placed the plastic-bottle of Oolong Tea she bought from the vending machine at the corner of the elevator onto the table before sitting down on the hard sofa. 'Hold on' she uttered accidentally before shutting up immediately. She herself was still young, but after seeing Asuna's glamorous beauty in a T-shirt and short pants, she finally realized that her voice was nearly 30 years old.

"Drink if you want to."

Asuna took up a bottle as she smiled and lowered her head,

"Thank you very much. I was just feeling thirsty."

"Have you tried the dispenser's water?"

Asuna gave a teasing smile as she heard that and rolled her eyes.

"The canal waters in Tokyo might taste better."

"Well, it seems to be purified seawater. I suppose there won't be any trihalomethanes mixed in. Unexpectedly, it might be more nutritious than the desalinated water those companies sell."

She took off the cap of the Oolong Tea and took a large gulp of the icy cold liquid. She really wanted to drink beer, but gave up as she would have to head to the cafeteria in the lower shaft to buy it.

Exhaling hard, Rinko stared at Asuna again.

"...It's a pity that you couldn't see Kirigaya-kun."

"But I feel really motivated for some reason, so happy that I was dreaming."

Asuna smiled, and one could see that the threads of anxiety that were clinging on her had snapped.

"Such a troublesome boyfriend; suddenly disappearing to the middle of a Southern sea like this. You better leash him up with a rope around his neck."

Asuna kept her smile once she realized that it was seen, and lowered her head deeply.

"I really, really want to thank you, Koujiro-sensei, for accepting such an unreasonable request...I really don't know how to thank you."

"No need for that. Just call me Rinko...also, this alone has not lightened my guilt to you and Kirigaya-kun at all."

Rinko shook her head, made up her mind, and continued to stare at Asuna,

"...I have something I have to say to you. Un, it's not just to you...but also to all the players of the old SAO..."

"..."

Rinko tried her best to accept this as she continued to stare at Asuna's eyes. She took a large deep breath and exhaled it, removing two buttons on her cotton shirt. She opened her collar out wide, took out a thin silver necklace, showing a scar slightly to the left of her sternum.

"Do you know anything...regarding this scar...?"

Asuna continued to stare right above Rinko's heart, and finally nodded slightly in agreement.

"Yes. That is the place the long-distanced micro-bomb was buried into. So sensei...Rinko-san was threatened by the Guild Leader...Kayaba Akihiko for two years."

"That's right...I was forced to take part in that terrifying plan and take care of that person's body as he dived in for a long time...—to the world, that would be the case. That was why I wasn't sued, my name was not disclosed, and I escaped to America on my own..."

Rinko put her shirt and her necklace back on and continued to try her best as she said,

"But that's not the truth. It's true that the bomb was taken out at the police hospital, and there was a chance of it being triggered, but I knew that it would definitely not explode—it was just a cover. Once the incident ended, I never pursued matters further as the fake weapon that person buried was the only gift he gave to me."

Even after hearing that, Asuna's expression never showed any change. The pure, clear eyes that seemed as if they could see through her inner heart continued to stare at Rinko intently.

"—Kayaba-kun and I started dating during the year I entered university, and including the time we spent in our further studies, we were lovers for 6

years...but I was the only one who thought that way. I am definitely older than you, but I'm far more stupid than you since I could not see Kayaba-kun's heart at all. What he wanted was simply one thing, and I didn't detect it at all."

As she looked out at the vast endless ocean in the night, Rinko started talking about the 4 years-worth of words she wanted to say little by little. She unexpectedly said the name which would normally cause a sharp pain in her head the moment she started thinking about it successfully.

During the time she enrolled in the famous Industrial University in Japan, Kayaba Akihiko was already the head of the 3rd developing branch in Argus Corporation. Kayaba signed a licensed agreement in high school as a game programmer, and Argus rose from a weak 3rd rate maker to a top game maker worldwide, so it was not inexplicable for him to be granted a management position after he entered university.

It was said that Kayaba had an annual salary of more than 100 million when he was 18, and after including the license fees, it would reach a shocking level. Naturally, numerous girls in the campus approached him in all sorts of ways, but there were many who backed away after receiving his colder-than-ice stares as he was completely uninterested.

Therefore, Rinko could not understand why Kayaba never rejected her, a year younger and not outstanding. Perhaps it was because she had never heard of him before that? Maybe it was because she had such a sharp brain that she was allowed to enter and exit the Shigemura lab? One thing that was certain was that he was not attracted by her looks.

The first impression Rinko had of Kayaba when she hugged him was that he was a malnourished beansprout. The usual pale face, the crumpled white clothes on him, the inspection device that was always on him like a necessity; she remembered the incidents clearly as if it was yesterday, about how he dragged her to Shounan on a rented light car.

"If you don't occasionally come out to sunbathe, the idea of coming out will not appear!"

Rinko told him off in a completely unexpected manner, and Kayaba, who was in the passenger seat, looked surprised as he stared back. Eventually after some time, you will not think of sensing the emulation of natural light on your skin. he finally said, causing Rinko to be thoroughly shocked.

A while later, she realized the other side to the fame that came to the young Kayaba; so one could say that there was no effective way to change him socially. He was always a malnourished beansprout, and whenever she went to his room, she would chide him and make him eat some of her native cuisines.

That person never rejected me. Maybe he was trying to ask me for help, but I didn't realize it, perhaps? Rinko asked herself that for god knows how many times, but she never got an answer. The man Kayaba Akihiko never relied on anyone other than himself until the end. He wanted only one thing, «a world that was not here», he wanted to head toward a door that was forbidden to humans who were not gods.

Many times, Kayaba had talked about the giant castle floating in mid-air that appeared in his dreams. That castle was made of multiple levels, and each level had streets, forests and grasslands reaching out throughout the place. One would have to use the long stairs at the side, and the sky had a dreamlike beautiful palace—

"Is there anyone there?"

The moment Rinko asked this, Kayaba smiled and answered, I don't know.

—When I was very young, I always dreamed of heading to that castle every night. Every night, I would climb up the steps one by one and head towards the sky. But one certain day, I couldn't reach that castle again in my dream. I almost forgot that useless dream.

However, the day after Rinko handed in her Bachelor's Thesis, he went on a trip to the castle in the sky and never came back. He merely used his hands to turn the floating castle into reality, took 10,000 players away, and left Rinko alone on the ground—

"I knew about the SAO incident through the news and saw Kayaba-kun's name and photo. I could not believe it, but once I took the car to his mansion, I realized that it was true when I saw many patrol cars parked there."

Rinko felt the slight aching in her voice that hadn't happened for a long time, and continued on in an interrupted manner,

"That person never said a single word to me until the end. It was the same when he started his journey. He never sent a single mail to me. Un...I was

really a big idiot. I helped in the basic design of the Nerve Gear as well, and I knew that he was making games in Argus. However, I never detected what he was thinking of at all...when Kayaba-kun disappeared without a trace, I ran around Japan looking for him. I managed to think of it successfully. It was something weird I thought about; in the past, there was a marker in the mountains of Nagano in his car navigation log. My instincts told me that it was there. If I had told the police about that place, the SAO incident might have headed down a different path..."

Perhaps if the police had entered that mountain villa, Kayaba might have killed all the players like he had declared. However, he himself said that he wouldn't allow it. Rinko thought.

"—I avoided police surveillance and went to Nagano alone. I spent 3 days searching for the mountain villa through my memories, and before I knew it, I was completely covered in mud...however, I worked so hard not to become his accomplice. I...wanted to kill Kayaba-kun."

And just like the first time they met, Kayaba never showed a single doubt on his face when he welcomed Rinko. She could not forget the heavy and icy feeling of the knife she held behind her.

"But...I'm sorry, Asuna-san. I couldn't kill him."

She could not restrain her voice from trembling, however, as she merely tried to hold back her tears.

"I definitely couldn't not lie about that incident again. Kayaba-kun knew that I had a knife and merely said 'such a troublesome person' like usual , put on the Nerve Gear again and returned to Aincrad. During that long dive, he never cared about the long beard that grew on him, and there were many bits of stuff on his arms. I...I just..."

Rinko could not say anything again as she continued to adjust her breathing.

Finally, she calmed down. Asuna said,

"Kirito-kun and I never blamed you, Rinko-san."

The girl who was 10 years younger suddenly lifted her head, showing a vague smile as she stared at Rinko.

"...About that...I might not be the same as Kirito-kun, but I do hate the guild leader...Kayaba Akihiko a lot, and I haven't settled things with him."

Rinko remembered that Asuna belonged to the guild Kayaba created in that world.

"It's true that the incident caused the death of 4,000 people. If I imagined...how much despair and fear they had when they died, I definitely can't forgive the guild leader's crime. However...it's a selfish way of putting it, but it's likely that during the short time I lived in that world with Kirito-kun, that might be the best memory in my life at this point."

Asuna moved her left hand and made a move, looking like she was about to hold onto something near her waist.

"And just as the guild leader is guilty, I am guilty, Kirito-kun is guilty, and you are guilty too, Rinko-san... However, I feel that nobody can compensate for it with their punishment. Most likely, we might never see that day of redemption, but even so, we have to continue to face our guilt."

That night, Rinko dreamt of a long-forgotten time—her time as a student, when she did not know anything.

The light sleeper Kayaba would always wake up earlier than Rinko, drinking coffee and reading the newspapers. Rinko would always wake up when the sun rose completely, and he would smile wryly like he was treating a sleepy child, and would say, good morning.

"Really, you're such a troublesome person, coming to a place like this."

The heavy voice caused Rinko to widen her eyes slightly. She realised that there was a long and tall figure in the midst of the darkness.

"It's still night..."

Rinko again closed her eyes as she smiled and muttered. The air flowed slightly, and the hard footsteps moved away. Then, she heard the sound of the door opening and closing.

She was about to again enter a deep sleep, but right before that—

"—!!"

Rinko gave a deep sigh as she got up. The comfortable feeling immediately vanished, and her heart was wailing loudly like an alarm clock wailing. She could not tell which was dreamland or reality for a moment.

She searched around for the remote and switched the lights in the room on.

There was no one in the windowless cabin. However, Rinko felt that there was the faint remaining odor of someone floating in the air.

She got up from the bed and walked towards the door barefooted. She anxiously pressed the operation panel, unlocked the door and walked onto the passage through the gap as the door slid open.

There was no one in the inside passage that was lit by faint orange lights, whether it was left, right or anywhere she could see.

A dream...?"

She thought so, but there was that ringing voice of that software deep inside her ear. Rinko subconsciously held the rocket pendant that she always had with her.

What was inside it, that was welded and could not be opened again, was the miniature bomb that was sealed right above Rinko's heart. The pendant seemed to give off its own heat as it scalded her palm.

Chapter 3 - Zakkaria Sword Arts Tournament (8th Month of Human World Calendar 378)

Part 1

Looking down at the innocent sleeping faces from the high beam above, it made such a thought unwittingly.

Two boys were using the very sturdy dried straw piled up in the very old warehouse as beds, sleeping soundly. Appearance wise, they did not look too weird. The boy, who was lying horizontally as he slept, had flaxen colored hair, and his eyes that were shut now were deep green in color. Either way, it should be a color that could be seen everywhere in the area NNM... «Norlangarth Northern Middle». The height and physique were all within the average for boys at this age.

In contrast, the boy lying on the left with his limbs spread open had pitch black hair and eyes, and that was a rare sight. The chances of seeing dark colors was more common in the East area and the South, and the chances of giving birth to a child with black eyes and hair in the Northern region was rather rare, even though one could not say that there was no chance at all. As the entire population of the Human Empire had grown to such an extent, it may be possible for such an instance to occur. His physique was identical to the boy beside him, as if they were twins.

163 days ago, it was ordered by the «Master» to directly observe the duo. It arrived all the way here from Central Centoria, and was somewhat disappointed. Whether it was appearance or verbalism, they were not much different from those of the same area and age, but it felt that their planning and ability to avoid danger under dangerous circumstances were below average.

It had been half a year since it followed the duo, taking care not to be noticed.

The rainy season passed, and just when the summer was about to pass, it gradually understood why the «Master» fancied those two.

The lack of planning and abiding the rules was merely a display of inquisitiveness and seeking. Also, the black haired boy's imagination and mobility was shocking even to him, who had lived in this world for more than 200 years. Ever since it started watching them, there were many times where it was worried that the boy would break the Taboo Index.

On thinking through it carefully— that should not be the case. He probably should not be able to do such things. He did things similar to what [it] who the «Master» viewed as an archenemy did, destroying the permanent boundaries scattered all over the world in several days...

At this moment, the black-haired boy who was sleeping started moving his limbs as if he saw something. The shirt that acted as pajamas flipped up, and one could only sigh at the sight of him starting to move again without caring that his navel was exposed.

Summer was over, and the night wind was rather cold in this area that could be considered the northern Norlandgarth area. There were many openings in this warehouse, and if he continued to sleep on the straw bed with his navel exposed, the chances of his «Life» getting a slight illness would be very high. The next day— Human World Calendar 378, August 28th could be said to be the biggest hurdle in their journey up till now.

They should have earned enough money by working in this farm for an entire summer, and though it wanted to tell them many times to at least sleep in an inn in the town, it could not interact with them directly. As it felt anxious observing them, both of them continued to sleep in such a simple warehouse—

And in the end, it ended up like this.

...It can't be helped. If I interfere like this, «Master» will forgive me, definitely.

It stood on the high beam and waved its right hand. A spell was muttered, the fingertip let out a green light, forming a ray of «Wind Element».

It cautiously let the «Wind Element» fall beside the black-haired boy, 30 cen towards the dry straw, and steadily «released» it.

A slight breeze was created, whirling up a pile of straw that slowly covered the boy's exposed navel. It was not reliable as a blanket, but it should be enough to cover the cold air blowing through the gaps.

It put its hand down and continued to stare at the two boys who did not notice what was going on before starting to consider what to do next.

The Life was permanently frozen, and the magic caster that was a «Master» had been taking similar missions for almost 200 years. However, it never had any memories of being interested in the observed parties.

However, it should be a function that was without «emotion». This body was not that of a human... Or rather, not a main Human Unit in this «Underworld».

Even if it could have predicted that the boy would get a cold right before this important trial, the problem was why it did not ignore this, but used a spell to interfere. Or rather, if his body collapsed, if the spell failed, its long mission to observe would be over, and it could return back to the corner of that large library it missed...

In other words... instead of going home, would its journey with the duo end just like this?

Impossible. This is too illogical. It's like I'm influenced by both of their irregular movement.

I can't continue to think. This isn't part of the mission. All I need is to do is to follow and observe both of them. I have to observe these two people— the flaxen-haired boy Eugeo and the black-haired boy Kirito, move to their destination.

It curled its body back to 5 mil and leaped off the beam. It would not exhaust Life with such a small body, and it would not need to use spells. It landed like settling straw, and silently moved its slender legs to their usual position— the somewhat long black hair of the boy called Kirito.

It fastened its body on the numerous hair strands that were of the same color as it, and for some reason, chided itself for its small body.

The peacefulness, comfort, assurance; amidst all these, there was some sort of intense emotions amongst them all... And it could not think of why it was feeling this way.

—Such inexplicable boys.

It again had this thought, closed its eyes, and went into a light sleep.

Part 2

The next day was the last day of August, and the morning was extremely clear.

Kirito stretched his back and opened his eyes. He looked rather surprised as he grabbed a pile of straw that was covering his torso, and he

immediately sat up. He shook his head to wake himself up, and the observer that was hiding in his hair reached its arms and legs out.

It went to near the bottom of the strands of black hair and moved towards the fringe of it. This was its designated spot for observation in the door. As Kirito would occasionally scratch his head, it would have to be careful. A frozen Life merely meant that it would not decrease naturally due to old age, and Life would still be used up when the body got damaged. However, the maximum value of its Life was a lot larger than humans, and even after shrinking, its toughness was nearly completely preserved, so those sudden hits or whatsoever were still bearable.

Kirito did not detect the malt-grain sized observer that was hiding in his hair and slid off the pile of straw. He put his hand on the shoulder of his sleeping partner.

"Oi Eugeo. Wake up. It's morning."

The rough shaking caused the boy's eyebrows that were of the same color as his hair to jerk slightly while he cracked his eyes open. The green eyes appeared dazed for a moment, but after blinking hard a few times he seemed to grimace as he narrowed them.

"...Morning, Kirito. You're still the same as usual, waking up so early everyday."

"It should be the other way around. I say, wake up, wake up! We have to finish what we have to do in the morning; let's do some «style» training before breakfast. I still somewhat don't understand the 7th «Style»."

"That's why I told you to practice your «styles» besides just carrying out mock battles... I really can't believe you, trying to pull an all-nighter on the morning of the tournament... No, it's a little weird to say that in the morning. Well..."

"Forget about pulling an all-morning or all-nighter or whatever, we only have this one chance."

Kirito vaguely said some things as he forcefully dragged Eugeo up, gathered up the straw he had been using as a bed, and stored it into the large wooden barrel at the wall. He picked up the wooden barrel that was filled with straw and headed towards the exit.

The moment he walked out of the warehouse, the light of the new sun entered his eyes. The observer backed itself away and hid in the hut of black hair. Perhaps it was still a little too used to the dark corner of the large library as it did not seem to be too receptive towards the sunlight. However, Kirito happily took a breath of morning air and said this to no one in particular.

"The morning air's so cooling. It's great that I didn't get a cold on such a crucial day."

And you have the nerve to say so. I won't help you if you sleep with your navel exposed again. The observer could not help but exclaim in its heart, and Eugeo, who moved behind Kirito, said,

"We're going to get sick of sleeping on the warehouse straw sooner or later. How about we spend our lodging fees to sleep in the main house starting tomorrow?"

"Nope, there's no need."

Kirito grinned —of course, it was impossible to see his face from the base of the scalp, but one could deduce that it was a mischievous grin— as he simply said,

"Because, starting tonight, we're going to be living in the Zakkaria Barracks."

"...Please tell me where that confidence of yours comes from. Seriously..."

Yare yare.[2] Eugeo shook his head as he carried out a large barrel that was filled with straw, just as Kirito did. Both of them looked rather relaxed, but the weight of this 1-mel diameter sturdy wooden barrel would be pretty shocking even if it was only filled with straw. An ordinary young man of similar age could probably only take a maximum of 20 steps while carrying this barrel.

As for why the two skinny looking boys were not even sweating, the reason was that their «Object Control Authority» was ridiculously high. They could both wield the longsword that was lying against the wall of the warehouse— the Class 45 «Divine Instrument» level object, almost at will.

Then, why would these two seemingly ordinary looking young men, who lived in the countryside, have such great Authority? It had been half a year since it started observing them, and it still did not understand. However, it

could at least say that ordinary training or matches up till now alone would not be able to give that value. It would be possible if they were to fight high class wild monsters, but the monsters that were allocated around the village should have been hunted till near extinction. More importantly, those two did not have «Hunter» as their Sacred Task, and if they hunted more wild monsters than what was permitted, they would have broken two clauses on the Taboo Index. If the highly active and energetic Kirito could not do it, it would be impossible to talk about the loyal and honest Eugeo—

There was one possibility left; that they defeated an enemy that would grant an increase in Authority even wild monsters could not match... an «Intruder from the Dark Territory». But on the other hand, this was something that could not be done. Both of them were not guards, and it would be impossible for them to face the Dark Army. Also, the Dark knights who would regularly arrive, the goblin scouts should have been sent packing by the Integrity Knights that were sent over from the Capital Centoria to the Mountain Range at the Edge.

If there was an unexpected «invasion» near Kirito's village... there would be a greater concern as compared to their abnormal growth. That may become a foreboding. That may become a «Prophesized Moment» that was to come one day, yet was thought to happen much later...

As it hid itself in the black hair and pondered about these, both young men had moved the barrels that were filled with straw to the stables beside the warehouse. They filled up the feed buckets of the ten horses fully and took brushes to groom the horses' bodies while they started feeding. This job would be the first thing Kirito and Eugeo had to do in the morning as they live temporary in the «Wolde Farm» on the outskirts of Zakkaria.

After working for a mere 5 months and more, the technique both of them showed in using the comb would make one mistake them for having the Sacred Task «Horse Feeding». Both of them finished grooming the last horse, and all the horses had finished feeding. Then, the 7 o'clock chime came from the Zakkaria Church that was 3 kilolu away. The «Bell of Time-Telling» the Axiom Church built in every village and city could be heard clearly within a radius of 10 kilolu as the sound would not weaken at all, but it would be hard to hear from outside this range. This would be a psychological thought to make sure a Human Unit would not think of moving too far, but it did not seem to be effective on Kirito's group at all.

Both of them used a pail of water to wash their hands and hung the horse brushes on the nail on the pillar. They used their right hands to grab onto

the empty barrels, and left the stable. At this moment, an energetic greeting could be heard, seemingly awaiting the duo.

""Good morning, Kirito, Eugeo!""

The owners of the voices overlapped each other completely. They were the 9-year-old twin daughters of the farm owner—Telin and Telulu. Their hair and eyes were reddish-brown, and their shirts and skirt colors were completely identical. The only way to distinguish between them would be the colors of the ribbons on their ponytails. When they introduced themselves, the one with the red ribbon was Telin, and the blue one was Telulu. However, the two mischievous girls would often change their ribbons to make Kirito and Eugeo misidentify them.

"Good morning, Teli..."

Eugeo was about to answer the greeting as per usual, but Kirito stopped him from behind.

"Hold on! It seems a little weird here..."

The girls who heard these looked at each other, and then started laughing,

"Then, what's wrong?" "Is it your imagination?"

Their voices, their mischievous faces, the number and locations of the freckles on their faces were completely identical. Kirito and Eugeo pondered as they mumbled, looking back and forth.

As for why a Human Unit would have twins... or even the extremely rare triplets, even «Master» could not understand completely. After several consecutive cases of Units dying happened in the surrounding areas, the number of twins born increased. These are probably part of the human population adjustment system, and if that were really the case, there would not be a need to make everything the same. However, there were no flaws or strengths that could be used to determine between them.

—Even so, the «Observer» would only see the Unit's Status Window that would be indicated normally...in their terms, it would be the «Stacia Window», so it would be easy to see through the twins' switching their ribbons. In other words, Kirito's instinct was correct.

Believe in your own instincts. The observer who was lying at the root of the black hair muttered. Kirito did not hear this voice, but he raised his left hand to point at the girl with the red ribbon first.

"Good morning, Telulu!"

Then, he pointed at the girl with the blue ribbon.

"Good morning, Telin!"

The moment he finished, the twins stared at each other and exclaimed, "You got it!" They moved their hands that were hidden behind them up till now to the front, each holding a rectangular rattan basket.

"Here's your reward for guessing it correctly. Breakfast's Mulberry pie, you know!"

"We were very enthusiastic in picking the mulberries, you know! We spent a day picking them so that both of you can win in the tournament today!"

"Oh. I'm happy. Thank you, Telulu, Telin."

Kirito put the wooden barrel beside his feet and reached his hands out to pat the two girls on the head. The twins showed smiles as they stared at Eugeo with a slightly worried expression.

"...Are you unhappy, Eugeo?"

"Don't tell me you hate mulberries?"

Immediately, the boy with the flaxen-colored hair hurriedly waved his hands.

"No, it's not that. I like it too! ...It's just that I thought of something in the past. Thank you."

On hearing that, the twins showed a smile of relief and ran off to the round table placed between the stables and the rangeland. Kirito looked away from the girls who were preparing breakfast with crisp movements as he walked to Eugeo and patted him on the back.

"We have to win the tournament today and quickly rise to the top ranks in the army so that we can go to Centoria next year... To Alice. Right, Eugeo?"

Eugeo nodded hard at this soft but powerful voice.

"Yeah, that's right. The five months I've spent learning the «Aincrad-Style» from you was for this goal, Kirito."

This was a one-lined conversation, but there were many significant messages in them.

Amongst these messages, there was a term the observer, who had lived for more than 200 years as a caster, had not heard of— That inconceivable sword style name.

And also, there was the ultimate goal of the duo— The Unit called «Alice».

If the Alice mentioned here would be the same Unit as the Alice that existed in its memories... These two's wishes would be so distant and vague.

That was because she was in a very, very high place in the «Centoria Cathedral» located in central Centoria...

"Kirito! Eugeo! What are you two doing!"

"Hurry up! Or else Telin and I are going to finish breakfast!"

The twins who finished their preparations exclaimed, and Kirito hurriedly pushed Eugeo's back as he ran over.

This jerking interrupted the observer's thoughts and caused it to snap back to reality. For the past 5 months, it had been reminding itself many times that thinking was not the job of an observer. But it always found itself thinking in the end... No, it was worried about the future of these two.

It clung hard onto the black hair strand and sighed for the umpteenth time today.

After a noisy breakfast, the twins left them with the words, "We'll cheer for you!" and left.

They set the ten horses into the rangeland and cleared the stables. Normally, they would use a wooden sword to start practicing, but it was different today. The duo washed their bodies and hair beside the well —at this moment, the observer would leave Kirito's head and hide in the treetop nearby— and they changed out from their work-clothes into their own clothing. They then headed to the main farmhouse not too far away.

The wife of the farm owner, Toriza Wolde had a very straightforward personality as a female owner of the farm. That was probably why she heartily hired the two of them who looked a little weird. It was the same

today as she encouraged Kirito and Eugeo, who came to greet her, with a hearty voice and prepared their lunch boxes. As she sent them off, she quipped, "If you fail, forget about being soldiers in this town. Be Telin and Telulu's husbands!", and this statement caused the two young men to show very complicated smiles.

They left the main house and walked down 3 kilolu on the path leading to the city. Both of them basically never talked to each other, and such a situation itself had never happened before. Most likely, it was due to nervousness. Every year, on the 28th of August, the town of Zakkaria would hold the «Norlangarth North area Swordsmanship competition», and there would be people from more than 50 surrounding towns or villages taking part. Basically, all the participants would either be people with the Sacred Task «Guard», and Kirito and Eugeo would be the only ones without such a role.

There would only be two people who could join the Zakkaria army forces, one from the east and west block respectively, and both of them must not fail if they wanted to fulfill their dream, which would be the greatest hurdle for them. However, the problem would be what would happen if both of them were assigned to the same block, and the two young men probably did not consider this at all—

As it continued to let its thoughts run wild, the sound of kemuri grass bursting, *PON*, could be heard in their path.

It poked its head out from Kirito's front scalp, and saw the streets that were on the other side of the short hill, made from reddish-brown sandstone. This would be the largest town in the NNM area, Zakkaria. At this point, its population was 1950, and it was less than 10% of Central Centoria, but this day would still be really buzzing in this largest tournament that occurred every year.

As they walked to the West gate, Eugeo whispered,

"...In fact, if I had not seen it for real, I might really suspect whether Zakkaria town is real."

"Why?"

The boy with the flaxen-colored hair smiled as he heard Kirito's question,

"That's because... Basically none of the adults of Rulid Village have even seen Zakkaria. The ex-guard chief Doyke had the right to take part in the

tournament, but he never exercised it until he retired. I would never even get the chance to go to Zakkaria or something as the «Gigas Cedar Cutter». If it were a place where none of us in the village had went to before, and a place I couldn't see..."

"So you verified it for yourself."

Kirito muttered in place of Eugeo, and then smiled as he added on.

"It's great that Zakkaria does exist. If this town exists, it proves that Centoria wouldn't be a lie."

"Yeah. It's... really inexplicable. We went on our journey from Rulid village for the past 5 months, and even though we knew that this world doesn't just include that village, it still feels amazing now... It's really amazing."

Though it could understand the words of the boy Eugeo, it felt that Eugeo's amazement was really weird. The «Master»'s caster who had lived for countless years had seen Centoria and the entire human world that was 1,500 kilolu. Its information capacity far surpassed all Human Units except for the «Integrity Knights». However, there were other unknown areas as well. That would be the other side of the «Mountain Range at the Edge» that surrounded the human world... The Dark Territory. There were only a few rumors about how there were several towns and villages there and how there was even a large pitch-black city there... One of these days, it should have the chance to use its eyes to prove their existence.

Impossible... These are all baseless imaginations, but if we continue to observe these two, maybe one of these days—

Most likely, it was thinking about such things.

The sudden unexpected tremor nearly caused it to fly out from Kirito's head. It frantically grabbed tightly onto the black hair and continued to look in front without thinking about anything.

What entered its eyes was a horse that raised its front legs up. "Hihihihihi", it let out a crying-like sound as it looked like it was trying to shake off the Zakkaria guard that was riding on it. The shaking just now was probably Kirito bending down, trying to avoid the horse gallop.

At the West gate of the town 10 Mel away, the horse-riding squad was located at the stone bridge in front of the moat, and the horse started to go out of control at the moment Kirito was about to cross it.

"St...Stop, STOP!"

The soldier sitting on the saddle desperately tried to pull the reins, trying to calm the horse down, but it did not seem to show any effect. Live animals like horses would require a lot of Control Authority, but a Unit that had the Sacred Task of a «Guard» should be able to fulfill this condition.

In that case, there would be very few reasons as to why a horse would not listen to its rider and go crazy. For example, insufficient feed or water causing the Life to decrease, or that it sensed a highly dangerous large wild monster closing in— However, these two scenarios did not seem probable.

As it continued to deduce, the horse that went berserk started raising its front legs hand. Kirito, who was right below it as he ducked to dodge, could not avoid completely. The people passing by, who realized the strange situation currently happening, all cried out. Even an adult male's Life would be reduced by half once he was stomped on by a horse with such momentum... If it kicked the wrong location, it would be possible for the Life to deplete completely.

"DAN-DANGER...!"

Someone shouted this, and at this instant, Kirito moved, not backwards — but forward. He moved by the horse hooves that landed and went beside it, using his arms to grab onto the horse head tightly, saying with a sharp tone,

"Eugeo, behind!"

As he said that, the partner had already taken action. While Kirito was restraining the horse, Eugeo went behind and quickly reached his right hand out to grab the base of the tail that continued to swing. His lightning quick fingers took out something from between the brown-colored hairs, and at that moment, that berserk horse that was rampant suddenly became obedient.

Kirito gently patted the nose of that horse that was panting a lot.

"Okay, okay, it's fine now— Guard-san, please let go of the rope."

The still very young soldier on the saddle nodded his pale face and relaxed the tightly leashed rein. At the same time, Kirito moved his hand away from the head of the horse and took a step back. The horse then turned around

and galloped back to its designated location on the right side of the stone bridge. The crowd around them let out a sound of relief.

The observer could not help but sigh in a relieved manner together with the onlookers as it remained in Kirito's hair, subconsciously reaching its arms out to block itself in front. In was to cast a protective spell to protect Kirito from being kicked by the horse. No, if Kirito did not take action back then, it might have used it for real. As an observer, that was something that was not allowed.

The boy who did not know of a small passenger in his front hair heave a sigh as he put a hand on his chest, went to his partner, and whispered,

"...A « Large Marsh Horsefly»?"

"Correct."

Eugeo muttered back softly and looked around. Once he checked that the pedestrians who had stopped had started walking and that the soldier was focusing on his beloved horse, he handed the thing in his right hand over for Kirito to see.

What was in his hand was a winged insect 4 cen long with red and black stripes on the abdomen. It looked like a bee, but there was no poison sting on it. However, there was one sharp protrusion at the mouth.

Amongst the «harmful insects» that existed to limit the Human Unit's movements, this was not a particularly dangerous one as it would not bring direct harm to humans. Though it could deal very little damage to the Life through bloodsucking, it would only target horses, cattle and goats. The reason why the soldier's beloved horse went rampant was because it was bitten by the Large Marsh Horsefly in the butt.

"Feels weird..."

Kirito muttered as he scooped that pest that was killed the moment it was caught from Eugeo's hands.

"There shouldn't be any swamps around nearby, right?"

"Yeah. I was told on the first day we worked at the Wolde farm. The nearest swamp is near the west forest, and we definitely must not bring horses there."

"The west forest is around... 7 kilolu from Zakkaria. It shouldn't be possible for a Horsefly that lives near the swamp to fly all the way here."

In response to Kirito's question, Eugeo tilted his head slightly, and quickly said with a somewhat vague tone,

"Even so... It's still possible for them to slip into some merchants baggage on the way here, right?"

"...Well, that may be possible."

As the boys continued to talk, the pest that was between Kirito's fingers lost its red color at a very fast speed. The Life of insects were very low, and «Dead Insects» had even less Life, so it would only remain as a corpse for about a minute.

Soon, the Large Marsh Horsefly that was dyed light grey let out a soft voice as it disintegrated like sand, releasing itself from the very small body as it disappeared.

"Fuu", Kirito blew his fingers, nonchalantly looked around, and let out a slight snort.

"Anyway, whether it's you or me, we're really lucky that we didn't get hurt right before this important tournament. Good thing we were living with the horses at the farm every day."

"Ah, yeah. If we join the army, how about we try out being cavalry?"

"We came all the way here, so don't say things like 'if', Eugeo. We'll definitely join the army no matter what kind of obstacles there are."

Eugeo stared back at the grinning Kirito with a shocked expression.

"Obstacles... We have to win in the tournament, so there will be a lot of opponents."

"Ah... Yeah, that's right. What I wanted to say is, don't let down your guard right before the tournament. Maybe there might be many unexpected incidents like what happened just now."

"Eh, it's really unexpected for you to be such a cautious person, Kirito."

"Of course. I don't go well with those reckless people who don't think through before they act."

After saying that, Kirito patted Eugeo on the back,

"Alright, let's go fill our stomachs before the tournament."

Part 3

Zakkaria was a town that was surrounded by a rectangular wall from the east to the west.

The dimensions of the town were 900 Mel from North to South and 1,300 Mel from East to West. The area was approximately 5 times the size of Rulid village in the north where both of them stayed in. As it was right in the middle of a prairie, there were no neighboring rivers or lakes, and their source of water was well water. Thus, this place looked like it was a rather dry place, but there were a lot more plants here than the Southern Empire that was full of towns in the desert.

The roads and buildings were basically all made from reddish-brown sandstone, and the residents who came to and from had red-based clothing as well. Thus, the blue-based colored shirts of the two boys, who came from the North, were rather eye-catching. Eugeo lowered his head, seemingly worried about the stares the others showed, but Kirito did not seem to mind as he looked around at the shops on both sides of the road.

"Oh, the meat buns this shop's selling looks delicious... but the kebab shop sells it cheap for 2 Shears. Ah... Eugeo, which one do you want to eat?"

Kirito leisurely said so as he turned his head around. He then realized the attitude his partner showed. His black eyes blinked in a dazed manner.

"...I say, Eugeo. It's been the third time in Zakkaria already. There's no need to be so tense."

"Now that you mention it, it really is the third time... But this is the first time I'm seeing so many people after leaving the village."

"If you're saying such things after seeing the people in Zakkaria, what will happen when you get to Central? Also, there will be hundreds in the stands at the swordsmanship tournament. Also, Uncle and Aunty Wolde said that they will bring Telin and Telulu in the afternoon to cheer us. Don't let them see you like that."

Eugeo, who was patted on the back by Kirito, showed a begrudging expression.

"...I-I understand. It's only at this moment that I envy your nonchalant personality, Kirito..."

"You can still say such things with a pale face, Eugeo-kun. Being 'nonchalant' is an important trick in Aincrad-style swordsmanship."

"Eh, re-really?"

"Really, really?"

As both of them continued to talk, they had already finished walking down the West main road that was approximately 500 Mel long. A tall building appeared right in front of them. This was the «Meeting Venue», the largest facility in Zakkaria. The rectangular shaped plaza that was proportionally smaller as compared to the town was now surrounded by the spectator stands. It was a multi-purpose space that was often used for lords' speeches, concerts and troupe performances, and of course, it was to be used for the Swordsmanship tournament today.

As the viewing was free, there were many citizens gathered here even when there was almost 2 hours till the opening of the tournament. To a Human Unit who were strictly restrained by their «Sacred Task» and the «Taboo Index» and all the other laws, this tournament that happened once every year would be their only chance of entertainment.

However, the intense atmosphere that came from the arena seemed to add on to the pressure on the boy Eugeo, and his face that was already whiter than Kirito immediately went pale.

"...Do, do we really have to fight here...?"

Kirito grabbed the arm of his partner who said that with a hoarse voice, ignored his emotions and complaints as he dragged him, one step at a time, to the participant registration window that was located at the front entrance of the Meeting Venue.

It was possible that most of the participants, who were either living in this town or were already residents of Zakkaria, should have finished their registration. A rather old bearded guard was sitting near the table of this temporary stall. Kirito fearlessly walked to the table and said loudly.

"Two people. Please register us."

On hearing that, the guard raised his grey eyebrows, and first sized up Kirito and Eugeo with a doubtful expression before coughing lightly, and said,

"The only ones who can take part in the tournament are only people who have the Sacred Task of a guard from the northern towns or villagers, or apprentice guards in Zakkaria, or alternatively..."

"This is the «alternate». I say, that."

Kirito nudged Eugeo on the side, who then hurried reached his hand into his tunic chest pocket, taking out what was a parchment envelope, and took a letter.

"Let me see...fm, so it's a written letter from the village chief of Rulid village. 'The two young men who have been entrusted with this letter have finished their Sacred Task granted by God Stacia. They wanted to seek a new path, and this is the proof.' I see."

At this moment, the middle aged guard stroked his beard.

"In other words, two young brats from the northernmost Rulid village, who aren't guards, want to find a new Sacred Task and wanted to become members of our Zakkaria guards."

"That's right."

Kirito answered back with a fearless smile, and then quipped,

"But we won't be staying around as guards here. Next time, we're going to head to Cen—"

Eugeo knocked him in the flank. He then continued on for his silent partner with a very quick tone,

"Tha-That's how it is. Please allow us to register for the next swordsmanship tournament."

"Fm. Okay."

The guard nodded, flipped open the tablecloth and handed a pen made of red copper.

"Write down your name, your birthplace and your sword school."

"...Sc-School, is it?"

Eugeo's hand that was reached out stopped, and Kirito took the pen from beside. It was not a highly durable parchment paper, but a common paper script made from white silk grass. It had all sorts of names in different handwritings, filling up the paper.

The black-haired boy wrote the name Kirito in the common language in this Human World and his birthplace as Rulid village at the end. He put the pen down for a short while, and then continued to write down the name of the school. «Aincrad Style».

It had been five months since the observer had been watching the two boys, and while there were all kinds of doubts during that time, the greatest one would be this name. There were approximately 30 sword styles in this world, but this was the first time it heard of the name Aincrad-style.

Perhaps it's a style the rebellious Kirito would create himself after attaining some sword skills. That was what I first thought, but it doesn't look that way. This mysterious Aincrad school is different from other schools; instead of having only one «Secret Style», this might have at least 10...

As it pondered, Eugeo finished his registration after Kirito —and of course, the school was the same— and handed the pen back to the guard. The guard put the pen back, brought the script back to himself, and again raised his eyebrows.

"Fm. In the past I wielded a sword for a long time, but I never heard of this school before. Does Rulid have such a school nearby?"

The guard's question was to be expected. Though there were more than 50 participants' names written on the script, half of them learnt the «Zakkalight Style», , and more than half of them were from the «Norgal Style» that was widely spread through the Norlandgarth Empire. There was no such oddly-named small school.

However, Kirito simply showed a calm expression.

"That's a school that was recently set up."

He answered, and the slightly pale looking Eugeo nodded his head as well. Of course, the guard would not refuse any registration because of a school, and after nodding 'I see', he handed them two bronze plates, each thinly engraved with the numbers. Kirito got '55', and Eugeo got '56'.

"Please head to the participant rest area before 11.30. We are going to assign participants into east and west blocks through a draw. At 12, we'll have the preliminaries, and we will use swordsmanship performance to reduce each block down to 8 people. You have to do move 1 to 10 in order, understood?"

After hearing the guard's question, Eugeo immediately nodded, and Kirito showed a somewhat doubtful expression as he nodded.

"Alright. Next will be the main show. We're going to carry out matches and reduce the number of people from 8 to 4, to 2 and to 1. That person... the winners from both East and West block, will then be granted the Sacred Task of being a Zakkaria guard."

At this moment, both of them nodded at the same time. The observer that was hiding in Kirito's hair shook and started thinking the same thing it had been wondering about several hours ago.

Both their goals were to enter the guards. Thus, both of them would have to be assigned into the East and West block each, pass the preliminaries and win in the main tournament. However, if the two of them were to be drawn into the same block, their plan would have failed. In regards to this problem, these two carefree young men should have some form of plan...

—The answer it got to its doubt was during the time when both of them finished their registration successfully, went to the plaza nearby, and divided the meat bun and the kebab.

"...I say, Eugeo... If we're in the same group, what should we do?"

Kirito, who quickly finished up the meat bun that was divided in half, asked,

"...What do you say, Kirito?"

Eugeo, who finished the first kebab, answered.

In other words, both of them did not think. It was to be expected, but the observer felt like its head was going to just drop off. THINK! It prevented itself from falling victim to the urge of yelling out as it took its frustrations out by pulling the hair gently. Kirito lifted his right hand, and the observer hastily moved to the top of the head while he scratched his forehead hair. Even at this moment, this young man just said something really optimistic in conclusion,

"Well, things will naturally fall in place. Don't worry. We'll definitely be in different blocks. I did pray to Stacia-sama and Solus-sama and Te...Tereri..."

"Terraria-sama!"

"Yup, I made my wish to that Terraria-sama."

"Haa", the observer that was on Kirito's head let out a soft sigh that overlapped with Eugeo's sigh. It walked back to its original position and muttered in its heart.

...There's nothing you can do. But is that alright, young man?

30 minutes later, right when the bell was about to chime at 11.30, both of them entered the tournament restroom.

The wide room that was approximately 20 Mel long had 4 sturdy looking benches on the west half of the room; and the participants were facing east. There were 4 slightly posh looking chairs placed there. They were empty at the moment, but there was a guard at the reception window.

The moment Kirito and Eugeo stepped into this room, they were stared at by the 54 other participants.

These adult men all looked like they had some amazing skills. Amongst them, 10 of them were wearing the Zakkaria apprentice guard uniform. Most of them were young, but the people from the neighboring towns who were chosen to be guards seemed to be in their primes. There were also people who had long beards and also those showing the nerve-wrecking scars on them.

Eugeo straightened his back in shock as he was stared at by these strong and ferocious participants, but Kirito looked rather calm as he looked around the room and softly said,

"...Great..."

"Wha-What's great?"

Kirito brought his face over to Eugeo, who said so with a really tense voice, and softly answered,

"There are no female participants."

"...I say, Kirito..."

"You're the same as well. It'll be hard for you to fight against a girl."

"Tha-That's true... or rather, I never even thought of such a possibility before."

"If possible, I really hope that such a situation will not happen until we reach that Four Empires Unity Tournament or something."

"You don't say. I heard before that the Western Empire has a knight squadron comprised fully of women."

"".....Ah!?"

And so, these two started their usual conversation without any sense of tension and the 54 ferocious participants soon lost their interest in these two young men, turning their faces that seemed to say 'these two young men are most likely going to be eliminated in the preliminaries' and started checking on their borrowed swords and adjusting their leather gloves.

Kirito again looked around the rest room, seemed to think of something, walked away from Eugeo, and headed off to the benches the participants were sitting on. He moved between the benches and breathed hard at a very fast speed. One could not tell why he did this at all.

After looking around for 5 minutes, Kirito finished inspecting all the participants, and again went back to Eugeo. He brought his mouth to the ear of his mystified looking partner, and muttered,

"Don't move your face. Second bench, the young man furthest in, do you see him?"

Eugeo twitched his eyes slightly as he followed what Kirito told him to do, and nodded,

"Yeah, that guy in apprentice guard clothing?"

"Be careful if you fight that guy. He might do something."

After hearing that, the observer, who was as shocked as Eugeo, probed its head out from the front of Kirito's hair. There was a young man with sandy-colored hair that was sagging slightly, and he had a reddish-brown uniform on him. The age, as seen from the data in the «Stacia Window»,

was 18, and his Life value and Object Control Authority were below average, so there should be nothing worth taking note of.

"Eh... Is it someone you know?"

Eugeo muttered, and Kirito shook his head.

"Nope, but... You might understand if I express it this way. That guy's personality is similar to Jink."

The Unit called Jink was the current guard captain in the Rulid Village both of them were born in. To them, he was a petty and unsociable person.

A Human Unit had to obey many rules and regulations, it would not mean that they were all friendly. If for example, there were people like the ones at the Wolde farm who would earnestly treat others, then there might be people who would look down on others, get in the way of others or make use of others in ways not stated in the laws. Rulid Village's Jink would be like that, and if Kirito's words were true, that seemingly harmless apprentice guard would—

"...Someone like Jink. He might try something like applying Shikami grass juice on my sword or something."

Eugeo frowned as he muttered, and Kirito tilted his head.

"Well... Won't that be against the rules?"

"It won't reduce the Life of the sword, but it can be used for polishing it. It will be hard to smell it once it's applied. I had been pranked on by him many times when I was young, and couldn't concentrate in practice, so I really have to hand it to him."

"...I see. Then, don't lose the sword you borrow. Don't let down your guard in the match. It's fine if I get assigned to the same group as that guy, but..."

"In that case, don't do anything crazy even if he does something, Kirito."

"...I'll try."

Kirito calmly chuckled as he nodded and turned around. He went to the Admission Window, used the registration bronze tablet. This was a tournament, however metal swords, instead of wooden swords, were used. Even though the Priority is lower, the power would still be enough to wear down a human's Life. Of course, as there was the rule that they were to fight until they nearly get hit, it would be definitely—unquestionably impossible to have any bleeding.

Both of them held onto their swords tightly, and 4 men walked in from an obscure entrance right when they sat down on the front bench. They were guards who were all dressed in bright red uniforms, and the bearded guard at the registration counter before was amongst them.

The 40-year-old man who had golden leader epaulets made a simple greeting, and a young soldier moved a very large box into the rest room. The leader patted the box, and said,

"In this box, there are small balls of blue and red colors, each numbered from 1 to 28, 56 altogether. Each of you need to put your hand into the hole at the top of this box and take out a ball. The red color indicates the east block, and the blue indicates the west block. The performance in each preliminary will be carried out in number order. If there are no questions, please take a ball each, starting from the front..."

Before the leader could even finish his words, Kirito immediately stood up and walked towards the box. Eugeo hurriedly followed, and soon, the other participants started standing up. *Gatagata*.

It moved from the front of Kirito's hair to the edge to look, and it could see a hole that was approximately 10 cen in diameter on the wooden box. However, it was dark inside, and the observer's eyes could only identify the shapes of the ball. At the same time, Kirito clicked his tongue, and the observer understood his intent on drawing first. If there were many balls in the box left, it might be possible to see the color of the upper-most ball through the hole. He was probably waiting for this moment.

Really, how can he still be so relaxed? He must be a very smart boy, but unfortunately, he lacks knowledge. In this world, the rule is that 'normal peeping methods can't work when it's done on a ballot box that can't be seen from the inside'. He has to have something that can get rid of this nature of the box— like a spell that creates a ray of light inside the box or one that can improve eyesight

"What's wrong, young man? Draw one."

The leader prompted, and Kirito slowly reached his right hand into the box. He could only rely on luck for Eugeo and him to be assigned to different blocks when he could not see the color of the balls, but—

...I'll help you out this time.

The observer muttered in its mind as it suddenly jumped off from the front hair the moment Kirito reached his right hand into the box. It used the shadow of the wrist as a cover and leaped through the hole and into the box.

The hand that was reached into the box grabbed onto the first ball it touched, and pulled it out. The observer was able to see the color in the box. Kirito drew a blue colored ball — the west block.

Once it realized this, it adjusted its body size from the smallest 5 mil to 10 cen, 20 times the size; and though much smaller than its original size, this would be enough. Its arms grabbed onto a wooden ball and raised it slightly. Of course, the color was red.

Several seconds later, the white arm reached into the box tentatively, and even without a «window», one could tell that it belonged to Eugeo. The observer pushed the red ball into the shaking hand that was moving in a

lost manner, completely unlike the decisive Kirito. The hand jerked in a somewhat shocked manner, but it quickly grabbed onto the ball and drew it out fast. At the same time, he let out an "Ehh!", which sounded really delightful.

It probably took him several seconds to open his hand, and after that, there was a cry, "Yes, Kirito! It's red!" After that, both of them scampered off while seemingly grumbled at by the 3rd participant.

...Really, always creating trouble for people.

It grumbled, and was about to shrink its body to leave the ballot box when it suddenly thought of something.

That young apprentice guard with the sand-colored hair. Why is Kirito so fixated on that Unit? It wanted to know the reason, being an observer. Well, then, I'll let that apprentice fight against Kirito instead of Eugeo.

I'll put off leaving for now and standby in a corner of the box for a while then. Anyone who opens the box and look inside will likely be shocked. I'm only 10 Cen big, but there shouldn't be any organism that's so big in the Human Unit world.

It hid his presence for several minutes. After the umpteenth time, a seemingly skinny arm reached in, and from the «window», it could tell that the arm belonged to the apprentice guard. It sent the blue ball it had prepared into the hand that was searching around in a psychotic-like manner. He did not suspect anything at all as he pulled his hand out to check, and the observer heaved a sigh of relief. This time, it shrank its body down to the smallest possible and onto the arm of the next person that reached into the box.

It continued to cling tightly onto that person's arm until it reached the bench, and then risked itself by scampering on the floor towards the feet of the boys who were sitting on the innermost side. It then climbed up their leather boots that had a crack, through the back of the cyan-colored shirt, and hid inside the black hair. It went back to the front of the hair and sighed deeply again again.

No matter what, interfering with the draw was against my duty as an observer. If «Master» knows about this, I might get scolded.

No, I might be able to observe more efficiently by separating Kirito and Eugeo into different blocks, and I put Kirito and that apprentice guard into

the same block to obtain more information. I'm definitely not thinking of anything other than that, let alone because of this. Even if— that apprentice guard has some ill intent, I won't interfere in his match with Kirito by using spells. I definitely won't do such things.

Part 4

The «Bell of Time-Telling» in the Zakkaria Church loudly chimed the noon melody, and palpable cheers rang out from the spectator stands.

In the midst of the clapping and the smoke grass, the 56 tournament participants lined up in two rows, moving from the rest room to the arena. Eugeo's row turned to the right towards the stage of the East block, and Kirito's row turned left to the West block. The 56 participants lined up near the stages and bowed to the leader of Zakkaria who was seated on the South block, the VIP seats.

The current leader, Kelgam Zakkalight finished his not-too-long speech, the anxious spectators let out a short moment of applause, and the tournament finally began. Even so, this was only the preliminary selection, taking place so as to first cut the number of people from 28 to 8. The contestants walked up to the East and West block stages one by one, showing off the designated «Style»

The term 'style' would refer to the trajectory of the sword, and of course, it referred to a series of actions that were strictly designated. What was demanded was a precision of actions, ferocity and elegance. To the observer who had witnessed the 5 months of training the boys went through, leaving aside Eugeo, there was some concern with Kirito. He had the mysterious «Aincrad-style» he created, but the tournament stated that the styles should all be from the Zakkalight style, and the ones grading were the Zakkaria guards and brass of the town. They were staring at the weird participants with stern glares, and it was likely that they would not hold back.

As it continued to watch worriedly as the tournament proceeded on, Eugeo's number in the East block was read out. His face was still as pale as ever, but he still summoned his courage at the crucial moment, bowed on the stage and did not show any stiffness as he drew his sword.

Eugeo took approximately 10 seconds per style, 100 seconds altogether to perform without mistakes, showing some form of dance-like elegance. This was likely the result of his intense practice during day and night, and also

the effect of having such a High Object Control Authority. To him, the sword he was wielding in the tournament was probably as light as a twig.

The spectators burst into a round of applause and cheers for the performance by Eugeo, neither a guard nor an apprentice guard, louder than for any of the participants before. The judges probably didn't want to give this mysterious visitor a very high score in their hearts, but could not act on their own impulses because of the restriction of the clause that «They could only assign points based on the performance». It would be another thing altogether if an «Imperial Noble», not restrained by the rule, was around, but the 5th rank Lord, the leader of this town, Kelgam Zakkalight, was the only one around and he was luckily, not one of the judges.

Eugeo, who finished his performance, walked down the stage, wiped off the sweat on his forehead, and gave a hearty grin to his partner who was waiting for his turn at the side of the West stage. Kirito gave a thumbs up in response, But honestly, you're the one who's making people worry here.

After 2 minutes, Kirito's number was finally called. He walked towards the large steps, not showing any signs of tension, but this caused the observer to feel anxious. Don't pull any flashy stunts now. Just be normal. The observer hid itself in the front of the scalp hair, hoping to command Kirito like this, but managed to endure it.

Kirito stood on the stage that was without any gaps, not made of sandstone, but of red marble. He bowed to the leader at the VIP seat, and immediately drew his sword. Such an impatient action caused the judges sitting right under the canopy to frown. However, Kirito did not mind at all as he raised the sword in his right hand. First, the first style—

Zun, the strong stamp rocked the entire arena. *Buush*, the wind that glided with the sword swings reached the spectator stands 20 Mel away. Cries of shock and some cries of anguish caused the nobles to leave their seats slightly. It was understandable since the style Kirito should complete in 10 seconds was completed in 2 seconds in a very forceful manner.

What are you thinking!? The observer wanted to rip off his hair, only to realize something important at this moment. In the rules, when performing the styles, there was no indication of how many seconds would be required to finish them. In other words, it would not be against the rules to finish quickly... But even so.

He adjusted his body that was swinging the sword, faced the spectators in the north and performed the second style. The raging sword winds that blew again caused the hair of the spectators at the front seats to dance, and this time, though the cries had some anguish mixed in, the cheers were a lot louder. Then, as Kirito continued to perform action number 3, 4 in a very fast manner, the cheers continued to grow loudly, and applause continued to rain. On thinking things through, it must be very boring to the spectators to see the same actions over and over again. That was likely why the tournament was held in two blocks.

Kirito did not slow down at all as he finished the ten actions. He sheathed the sword and bowed, and was greeted by a thunderous applause and cheers rained down on the entire arena. He looked over at the enthusiastic cheers, and saw the Wolde twins in the spectators at the West block, Telin and Telulu. As promised, they were brought here by their parents to support them.

Of course, the one who jogged over to Kirito, who was waving to the western spectators and casually walking down was Eugeo. He looked like he was trying his best not to grab Kirito by the shirt, but he wisely squealed out with a very soft voice,

"Wha-What were you doing?"

"Well, I just felt that it would take too long to see other people perform... So, I thought that it would be good to settle this fast."

"It might not be against the rules, but can't you just do it normally?"

"If I do it quickly, even if there were some slight miscues, the judges won't be able to see them, right..."

"..."

Eugeo showed an expression that was 70% shocked and 30% amazed, dropped his shoulders, and sighed hard.

"...Let's just pray that the judges will grade us according to the applause..."

On hearing Eugeo say such words lifelessly, the observer could only think Great minds think alike.

The preliminaries lasted for another hour, and ended when the bell rang at 2pm. The participants again stood on the stage, and the judges'

representations read out the numbers and names of those taking part in the finals.

The observer felt some form of relief after hearing that Eugeo passed the preliminaries, followed by Kirito a few seconds later. It never had such feelings in these few years of memories, and it could not help but bring its weak legs in.

—Really, when was the last time I got so emotional observing someone? No, I'll say this is the first time.

The 40 participants lowered their shoulders dejectedly as they left the rest room, and only 8 swordsmen from the East and West blocks were waiting in the standby area of the arena. They were all given Siral Water drawn from a deep well and some simple food, and during this time, the spectators were taking a short period of rest. Once the 30 minutes of rest ended, the finals would begin. In this elimination tournament, the 1st to 3rd rounds of battles would be held, and a winner will be decided from both the East block and the West block.

According to the Wolde farm owner, Banou explained to Kirito and the rest, that until several decades ago, there was a final match that was to be held between the winners of the East and West blocks. The reason why this event was cancelled was because of an accident that happened in a certain year because of intense fighting in the finals, where blood was spilled when it should not be spilled.

In the whole of Norlandgarth, the Zakkaria Tournament notwithstanding— No, in the swordsmanship tournaments held in the entire Human World, this was a rule that was strictly enforced.

This rule was based on the Absolute Taboo Index «In situations with no other clauses in effect, no deliberate harming of other people's Lives would be permitted». That was why there was such a paradoxical skill required in this tournament— So that they can ensure other people's safety while making them submit.

The reason for each school to focus on their «styles» was to prevent accidents from happening by making sure that both the fighter and the enemy's breathing were on the same wavelength. Style vs Style; this would refer to repeating the same attacks and defenses, and the first to be fatigued or lose concentration would most likely be the loser. The only times blood was allowed to be spilled would be the Higher Ranked

tournaments in Central where the rule «First Strike» or when prestigious organizations like the Integrity Knights or the Master Arts Academy take part.

However, Human Units had something that other living Objects did not have, something called «emotions». It was because of this that they had a powerful strength, but could also lose their cool and do unpredictable things.

The incident Banou Wolde talked about was a result of the rising emotions of the two Swordsmen 'wanting to win', causing the swords to hit each other on the bodies instead of the swords. Of course, there was no fatal injury involved —If it had become that serious, the Axiom Church would have intervened— However, a mere drop of blood caused the people in the town to be terrified. Of course, it was understandable why the final battle between the East and West block winners were scrapped.

Of course, these two young swordsmen did not know about this. Their aim was to be the winners of this tournament, stand out from amongst the guards, get the rights to attend the Central Centoria's Master Arts Academy exam, pass one hurdle after another, and one day, they hoped to meet this «Alice» in the Centoria Cathedral of the Axiom Church.

It was shocking, but both of them were headed down in the right direction. This was so troublesome and so distant, but that path would definitely lead them to the Cathedral. However... if Kirito and Eugeo really do gain the right to enter that white tower, both of them would have...

The 2.30pm bell broke this trail of thought. After that, the orchestra that was lined up in a corner of the spectator stands let out a majestic March, indicating the start of the finals.

The duo, which had already finished eating the simple meal, stood up forcefully from the fold-able chairs at the waiting area. The black and green eyes exchanged looks with each other, and they reached their right fists out to bump each other, turning away as if there was no need for more words as they head off to the stages of the East and West blocks. The spectator stand that was somewhat empty during the preliminaries was already filled up, and the rain of cheers descended like howling wind.

The guards in charge of miscellaneous stuff moved the large board with ordinary paper to the atrium the judges were at. The words that were written in black on them showed the table for the tournament finals that

would be carried out in an elimination format. On the East block, Eugeo's first match was the 3rd match of the 1st around. Kirito too had his on the 3rd match— but the observer's stare seemed to be attracted by the young apprentice guard called Egome, the one Kirito seemed to be worried about for some reason.

I've let him be in the same block as Kirito. That 5 mil body felt a mysterious feeling it did not feel during that draw. It did some baseless thinking. It could not possibly have the same functions as that of a human.

Kirito's concerns were completely different from the observer as he did not react even after seeing Egome's name. Once the chief judge's speech ended, he immediately walked down the stage and sat on the chairs in the West block waiting area. Eugeo came here when they were having their meal, but as of this moment, he could only remain in the standby area at the East block, so there was no chance to talk to him.

It watched the first and second match from Kirito's head, and saw that the battles were won smoothly.

The party that attacked first continued to use basic skills since the 3rd and 4th move, and the defense continued to take the hits without showing any openings, letting out a casual rattling sound. Then, it was a reversal of roles as the sounds of metal clashing could be heard again. One might mistake this for practice, but they were using real metal swords after all. No matter whether it was the side swinging the sword or the one defending, they would lose Life due to fatigue. Once the Lives drop past a certain value, their movements would show openings, and their defenses would become weird. The one to fail in defending himself ended up letting the opponent's sword tip poke right at his body— 'That's enough!' or something like that.

It felt completely different from the Central-class tournaments' speeds where the fighters would sprint and retreat. However, the tournaments held in the North should be something like that as well. The young man named Egome should not have any outstanding abilities, and in that case, the 3rd match of this tournament would likely be Kirito's easy victory since he had a larger Object Control Authority. The observer dispelled that anxious notion that came before as it boarded the red marble stage together with Kirito, who had his name called out.

A short moment later, Eugeo's name was called out on the East stage. However, from a glance, it could tell that Eugeo's opponent was too

overenthusiastic and was already sweating, so there was no sense of worry at all. On the other hand, Kirito and Egome were facing off against each other on the west stage, and the eyes under the sand-colored hair were staring intently at Kirito. It again checked the Stacia window, but the values were lower than the average competitor in the tournament. So why is Kirito so wary of him—?

Both of them started walking, drawing their swords slowly. The young judge raised his right hand and swung it down, shouting,

"—BEGIN!"

At the same time, Egome started to take action. Normally, both sides would first stare at each other and begin the battle after checking each others breathing rhythm, so there was a slight commotion from the crowd. However, this was not against the rules. Even though using surprise attacks to win was not advocated, it was a strategy in fighting.

"OHHH!"

Egome swung down from the top right side with intense vigor, and Kirito ran up to him to take this blow. *KLANG!* There was a mysterious metallic sound that never happened in the tournament up till now, and the yellow sparks that exploded lit their faces.

These swords that should be causing a knockback continued to remain clashed with each other, trembling slightly. Kirito countered with amazing speed, completely ignoring the fact that he was slower as he moved the sword up, pressuring the opponent. The two swords let out a grinding sound that echoed throughout the silent west block arena.

In this situation, Kirito moved forward, brought his face slowly to the nose bridge of Egome's face that was frowning hard—and muttered,

"You have the smell of Nedge Lezta on you."

"...So what?"

Egome let out a tone that sounded like the grinding of a metal force. Kirito then continued on in a deeper voice,

"There's only one use for Nedge Lezta. When dried and burnt, the smoke produced will numb venomous insects. For example... a «Large Marsh Horsefly»."

"..."

Egome's narrow eyes widened hard, and at the same time, the observer that was hiding in Kirito's head blinked.

That means that Kirito was moving around amongst the participants in the rest area to look for the person with that Nedge Lezta smell. In that case, the reason would be—

"...This morning, at the West gate of Zakkaria. You're the one who planted that Large Marsh Horsefly... that insect that caused the horse to go wild."

In response to this sharp question, Egome merely sneered maliciously.

"I have no need to answer to a homeless guy like you. But even so... what I did was just to release an insect that wouldn't harm anyone. I'm not breaking the Imperial Law or the Taboo Index here."

What the apprentice guard said then was the truth. If the Large Marsh Horsefly could harm humans directly... if it had been an organism that could take Life away, it would have been illegal to bring it to an area humans lived in. However, letting an insect that would only bite a horse would not break any rules at all.

However, things were not that simple. No matter how young children are, they can understand that a Large Horse Marshfly flying around horses would be there to bite horses... to wear out the Lives of the horse. It was imaginable that the horse would then go wild and could hurt the people passing by.

Most of the Human Units who realized this possibility would probably give up on this idea of letting this Large Horse Marshfly go. This was because there was the Taboo function of «Not reducing other people's Lives» working within their bodies. However, even after knowing that this would cause damage to Kirito or Eugeo... No, it was because he actively wanted this that this young man called Egome let the Horsefly go. To them, it was the thought of «I just let go of an insect that won't harm any humans. I have no idea what will happen next», a function that overpowered the thought of following the Taboo Index.

...The blood of nobility.

This young man was giving off the rumored dark side of the nobles. He was completely different from the people at the Wolde farm, a person who believed that «Anything that does not break the rules is acceptable».

"...Why?"

Egome seemed to spit out as he answered Kirito's short question,

"I don't like you. Someone who's homeless like you, who doesn't have a Sacred Task, wants to challenge me? This Egome Zakkalight-sama? You want to join our guards? I won't allow you. I wanted to wreck you when I saw you arrive to take the tournament rules slip last month."

"...I see, one of the nobles. But even if you have some prestigious background, you're just a lowlife for doing such things. Sorry, can we hurry up and end this now?"

Even after hearing that he was a blood relative of the Zakkaria leader, Kirito did not show any signs of fear as he said. He exerted some strength into the swords that were still clashed with each other, seemingly trying to make the opponent fall. But at that moment,

Egome again grinned, and after that, there was a sharp cracking sound. Kirito showed a slight stiffness. On looking over, while the two swords were clashed, Kirito's blade was the only one that was showing a small yet obvious crack.

Why would only one sword be affected when they're both swords borrowed for the tournament? It frantically opened the «Windows» for both swords, and there was an unexpected message over there.

Kirito's sword was a level 10 object, while Egome's sword was a level 15 object. On a closer look, it looked like there was a small difference in the glow of the blades.

"Ku...!"

Kirito groaned as he brought his sword back. This time, Egome brought his body forward. *Pnk*, *pnk*. It continued to let out cries as Kirito's sword was the only one with its Life decreasing.

"Speaking of which, this isn't against the rules either."

Egome muttered while showing a victorious look.

"According to the stipulation of the tournament, all participants have to fight using the metal swords loaned out by the judges. In that case... it's not against the rules even if there was a sharp sword mixed into these swords and I got it."

"...So you bribed the guard who loaned the swords out."

"I don't know anything. But would be it okay for you to keep this up, wanderer? No matter how much you try, you'll only cause that sword to lose it's Life."

Egome continued to swing over with all his might as he said that, while Kirito did something unexpected.

Kirito did not fight the opponent head on as he deliberately fell towards the arena and ducked past under the opponent's arm. Egome's sword let out a loud *GLANK* as it slid and smashed into the large marble. The recoil stunned Egome's body, while Kirito used this chance to leap away and keep his distance.

At this point, the spectators who were watching this nervously cheered. They had never seen an action like ducking under the opponent's arm while in the midst of a sword clash, and they, who did not know what the duo were talking about, rained down thunderous applause on them.

Egome finally recovered from the numbness as he faced Kirito, showing an enraged look.

It's dangerous. The observer instinctively realized this. Of course, as a noble, he could not break the Taboo Index as well, so he would not use the sword to hurt Kirito directly— However, on the other hand, if Kirito was hurt because of a slight accident, it would be fine. It's really amazing that he could think of something like this. The observer thought.

Such a hypothesis however was overturned by Egome's next move.

He raised the level 15 sword he had been wielding with two hands up till now with his right hand, and stopped at shoulder-height— It looked like he was putting it on his shoulder. Then, it seemed like he was looking for something as he spent several seconds adjusting his position. Finally, the blade was surrounded by a light blue glow.

"...Zakkalight Secret Art Finishing Move, «Azure Wind Slash»"[3]

The crowd again let out a thunderous applause— including applause from the East block. The referee on the stage looked rather troubled as he stared over at the judges' seats, but it seemed that they were pretty lost there as well. As the name suggested, the «Secret Arts Styles» here would refer to the finishing moves of each school, moves that normally could not be used, but there was no stipulation in the rules to follow, so the participants were given full reign to decide. Once Egome decided to use it, there was no way anyone could stop him.

However, the issue was that the power of the «Secret Art» was incomparable to the other normal styles, and once it was activated, it could not be stopped midway. The user's body would move on its own, not by its own will, but by a supernatural force that was similar to Sacred Arts. In other words, if Kirito's defense failed, it would not just corner him, it would break his body. Egome clearly understood this, and even so, he wanted to use this Secret Art— Most likely, he thought that even if there was blood spilled, it was just the defender's fault for not taking it probably.

However, there was still a way to stop Egome's move.

That would be to let Kirito put his sword down and expose himself to the enemy's attack. At that moment, Egome's resolve would break, and using a Secret Art here would clearly be breaking the Taboo Index. No matter what kind of noble blood he had, it would not be able to override the authority of the Taboo Index, the power of the Axiom Church. That was the absolute limitation that was ingrained in the Human Units.

Put down the sword. The observer tried its best to stop itself from saying these helpful words to Kirito. Even if I don't say so, he'll realize this. Hurry up, put the sword...

"...So the secret move's coming up."

Suddenly, Kirito muttered in a volume even the observer on the head could not hear.

He moved his left hand from the sword hilt, just as Egome did, and positioned himself in a way such that it looked like he was putting the sword at the left side of his waist. As his body stopped, a bright purple glow was emitted from the sword.

On seeing this, the spectators and the judges held their breaths. Eugeo, who was on the opposite stage, shook his head yare yare. It remembered that whenever such a scene happened, everything would be over.

Egome's face trembled and twisted as he bared his teeth.

"KYYYYYYYYYYAAAAAAAAAAAAA—!!"

With the shout of a large bird Object, the art was activated. He took a hard step to the front with his left foot, raised the metal sword that was resting on his shoulder, and slashed out in a diagonal trajectory that was aimed at Kirito.

Got to stop this battle. At this moment, the observer was seriously considering about this. However, it would be too late to use a Sacred Art here. Got to jump off from Kirito's head and show my true form. It will be completely against the rules— But even if I have to take whatever punishment Master gives me, it will be far less compared to letting my observation target...

But at this moment.

"—Shuu!!"

Kirito showed off a sharp momentum as he too moved.

He fearlessly rushed towards the light blue trajectory Egome drew out. His right hand moved and carved out a bright purple line in the air from the left to the right, and also another attack— from the right to the left.

KIIN!! A sharp metal sound was released, passing through the walls of the arena, and seemed like it could be heard from all the streets and corners of Zakkaria.

A sliver glow danced high in the air, reflecting off the light from Solus above as it slowly landed. A blade that was sliced from the edge was stabbed straight into the red marble stage.

Kirito's sword skill was really so fast that even the observer did not notice it at all, completely. However, it did see the crucial moment.

The sword swung from left to right and immediately went from right to left. As the speed was too fast, it felt like Kirito was attacking with two swords from both left and right sides. In fact, there was only one metallic sound. These two hits resembled beasts gnawing as they accurately hit the same point— and shattered Egome's sword. With a tournament sword that had its Life reduced by half, the sharp sword that had 5 levels of priority was...

Egome's eyes widened as he remained still. He, who had swung down the sword with only the hilt left vertically, could not help but tremble. Kirito, who maintained his sword swinging position too, whispered into Egome's right ear from a nearby position,

"Aincrad style Twin-consecutive-hit Skill... «Snake Bite»"

On hearing these words—

The observer felt all of its hairs standing.

This human called Kirito... actually had a uniqueness that far exceeded its expectations. Even with the 378 years of history in the Underworld, it was rare to see someone like him... Perhaps he might even be on equal standing as the Master, «That person».

As it continued to feel this inexplicable feeling, no, this feeling it was not even conscious of, it was only thinking of one thing.

I want to witness the end of these two's journey, Kirito and Eugeo.

Over there, there will definitely—"

In the Human World Calendar 378, the Zakkaria Swordsmanship tournament East and West block winners were the young men with no Sacred Tasks, who came from a village in the north. As per tradition, they earned the rights to join the guards.

In the end, the first match was the only one that troubled Kirito somewhat, and he never used the «Two-consecutive Hits» thereafter. The next spring, Kirito and Eugeo would earn the recommendation letters required to attend the Royal Swordsmanship Academy, a fact that could not be more obvious.

Chapter 4 — Master Sword Academy (3rd Month of Human World Calendar 380)

Part 1

—If possible, I really don't want to fight against women until the Four Empires Unity Tournament.

I said this to Eugeo before during the Zakkaria Swordsmanship Tournament. Since then, it had been one and a half years.

It has been about two years since we chopped down the «Demon Tree» Gigas Cedar at Rulid Village and left the village. Half a year later, we joined the Zakkaria guards, and another half a year later, we reached Central. It has been a year since we knocked on the doors of this academy.

It seemed like a very long time, but as I recalled this, it was really amazing. 2 years would be around the same amount of time as when I was trapped in the floating city of Aincrad.

Luckily— I should be about to say this, this Virtual world «Underworld» I dived in unknown circumstances was operated by a super-technology that far exceeded my imaginations.

The «Fluctlight Acceleration Function»— it magically magnified the sense of time and accelerates the person in dive mode. Theoretically, it could be accelerated to 1000 times the time in reality. In other words, the physical body of Kirigaya Kazuto that was lying in the real world would have dived for only 18 hours ever since it began.

To think that I woke up in the forest near Rulid Village, spent 2 years to reach the Norlangarth Empire Swords Academy, and not a single day had passed in the real world yet, I felt a little dizzy, and yet a little relieved. In the worst case scenario, even if I were deemed missing in the real world, not much time would have passed for that assumption to be made.

I did not want my parents, Suguha, my friends, and of course Yui and Asuna to worry. Of course, knowing Asuna and the rest, they would never merely sit and worry; they would definitely do something. This is what worried me the most.

Either way, the current situation would have devastated Asuna and the rest, and the me in this world tried to take note not to interact with females. I made this decision when I stepped out of Rulid Village —that it was great that Eugeo was a guy— I thoroughly swore to follow this oath and said such things in Zakkaria, however...

What I never ever predicted was that I would regularly have sword scrimmages against swordswomen during the past year in Centoria.

"I'm here to help you revise, First Year."

The one who ordered with a clear voice was a senior student who wore her purple-based uniform neatly and tied her dark brown hair in a ponytail, my «Senior».

"Understood, Rina-senpai."

I answered, and drew the practice wooden sword from the leather sheath on the left side of my waist. It was a wooden sword, but it was made of the highest quality platinum oak, and one would mistake it for a glossy metal. It did not have a blade and it did not have cutting ability, so even if it grazed some clothing, the clothing's Life would not decrease. But in terms of priority, it was a lot larger than the crude metal sword I borrowed in the Zakkaria tournament.

The swordswoman saw me get into position with my sword drawn, and also drew her wooden sword in a fluid manner. The posture she made was slightly different, a slanted position where the right half of her body blocked the left arm. This would be the basic style of the «Serlut Fluid Combat Skills» she inherited from her family.

"...This is the last time. You have no problems using your left hand anymore."

I said with a chuckle, and she answered back with a stern look, "Is that so." She then placed her left hand behind her waist, right below the large sash.

The swordswoman was standing 10 Mel away, no, 10 meters away as she made her posture, and the way she showed her determination looked really beautiful.

In terms of height, she was 3cm taller than my 1.7m tall frame. The flowing hair was tied by a rattan colored ribbon that matched extremely well with the dark brown hair. The ferocity of a warrior and the elegance of a noble

were mixed together on the beautiful face. The navy blue color of her eyes were like the sky that was fading into twilight.

The jacket of her neat uniform and the gently swaying long skirt were of a glacial purple color. It was not an eye-catching color, but it looked much more glamorous than anything else she put on, which was really unbelievable. However, the body that was encased under the clothing was a refined iron-like one, and I knew this because of my role.

"...This will be the last time."

She— Sortiliena Serlut, a child of the Norlangarth royal family and the second rank of the Master Sword Academy— maintained a position that was without any openings as she muttered.

I— the Beginner Trainee of the Master Sword Academy, Kirito, was her «Valet». I nodded silently and lowered my body down.

Every day, the lessons and practical training would last from 9am in the morning till 3pm in the afternoon, and after that, I would have to be her valet for an hour. I was drained physically and mentally, but all sorts of fatigue was long gone since I was able to fight against Sortiliena-sempai. It was already 5pm, and we were the only two left on the practice ground that was built in the Elite swordsmanship dormitory, located on high ground in the Academy campus.

Eugeo's probably sighing away at the Trainee dormitory because I broke the curfew at this point, but since he's a valet to another swordsman, he should be able to understand.

I thought, and then focused my consciousness on the sword in my right hand. Rina-sempai's eyes suddenly became dull as the air seemed to show a flash of electricity, causing me to tense up. The lamps that lit the wide practice field swayed slightly, seemingly unable to withstand this tension.

Even without a referee around, both of us took action at the moment our breathing was in the same rhythm.

Petty tricks would not work on Sortiliena-sempai, who was called the «Mobile Tactics Overload», so I took a step forward, closed the distance of 10m, and did an unexpected vertical slash.

The teachers would definitely tell me off if I used this skill in actual sparring, but I would be taken down immediately if I used that slow Norlangarth-style in this match. Either way, Sortiliena-sempai's Serlut-style was the most practical sword style I knew of in Underworld.

The one fastest strike I unleashed was blocked by the wooden sword in Sortiliena-sempai's right hand. However, there was no impact at all. She used the gentleness of her arm, shoulder and waist as she took my attack by tilting the side of her smooth blade. This would be the Secret Art of the Serlut-style, «Active Water». She had been teaching me this move for the past year, but I still could not grasp it completely even after knowing it.

On a side note, the language used for writing and speaking in this world was completely Japanese (and a few foreign languages), but there were very few kanji. Most likely, it was about the equivalent of 30% of the JIS Level 1, as it used only about 1000 kanji words. But even with such restrictions, they managed to give so many sword skills unique names.

The imagination of the people in Underworld was really astounding. Right now, there were only stories read to young children. In another 100 years, it would not be strange to see someone write a novel. If it was sold in Japan in the real world and got a ridiculously large amount of hits, it would be really amazing...

I jumped forward to the right, seemingly trying to shake away those random thoughts in my mind. That was because I learned my lesson after sempai broke my balance with the «Active Water» and countered.

I flipped in the air and landed near the wall of the practice ground. My right foot stepped on the black shining wall, and I charged forward— As I did this, Rina-sempai's left hand took action.

It moved from behind her waist to the front of her body, drawing an elegant arc as a white light extended out from her fingertips. Of course, this was not because she was using a Sacred Art called «Light Element». Its true form was a whip that was made of fine white leather, the weapon she was most skilled with other than the sword.

The practice whip made from the soft Wilde goat skin would not reduce Life even with a direct hit, but it would be painful enough to produce tears. I instinctively wanted to wield my sword to get into a defensive position, but the blade would be wrapped up by the leather whip and nullified. However,

if I did not do so and back away, a second, and third hit would come right at me.

I desperately turned my body to the left, trying to dodge sideways to avoid this. The tip of the leather whip grazed past my right cheek and flew behind, and using this chance, I charged forward.

However, this leather whip that let out a loud, shrill swipe in the air coiled its body like a snake as it pulled back. I would have to get to her before the next hit occurred. I decided that it would be impossible for me to reach her by running alone, placed my wooden sword in a parallel manner to my right leg, and pulled it back. I kept my body low, bent forward, and at this moment, the blade let out a blue glow.

Rina-sempai suddenly narrowed her eyes and opened her left hand. She decisively released the leather whip in her left hand and placed it on the sword handle her right hand was holding.

Immediately afterwards, my body accelerated as if it were moved by an invisible hand. It was called the Aincrad-style, but it was actually a «sword skill» that existed since the old SAO— the one handed lower sword thrust skill «Rage Spike». I continued to decrease the 7m distance while feeling like I was one with the wind.

In contrast, Rina-sempai tilted the sword she was wielding with two hands to the rear right side. *Don*, she stepped forward with her left foot, and her wooden sword let out an emerald glow. It was the Serlut Secret Skill «Linker».

My wooden sword swung up from the bottom right side, and it clashed with sempai's sword intensely as it swung over horizontally. Our wooden swords let out a metallic-like impact sound, and the green and blue sparks that were let out immediately lit up the dim training ground.

I straightened myself as our swords were right on each other, and Rina-sempai's face was 10cm away from mine. She looked as cool and collected as ever, and her snowy white forehead did not show a single bead of sweat. Even so, she managed to deal so much pressure to my sword. If I'm not careful, I'll be beaten by her.

In this world, the abilities of humans, the «Character Status», were somewhat complicated.

Even if I opened what they called the «Stacia Window», the most it showed were the current value/maximum value of the Hit Points and the two level indicators «Object Control Authority(OC)», and «System Control Authority(SC)».

Amongst them, the OC Authority controlled the use of weapons and armor, while the SC authority controlled the use of Sacred Arts. In other words, the former would be the equivalent of strength(STR), while the latter would be in charge of intelligence(INT). This was a simple deduction I made at first. However, STR alone did not seem like it was controlled by OC Authority. It seemed that there were other factors like age, physique, health status, experience and training and all sorts of parameters.

I had been thinking through this. If a young kid's OC Authority level was raised to the maximum because of some reason, and if strength was decided through that value alone, there would be a kid with monstrous strength. If I started off with the objective to survive in this world, I wouldn't like such irregular phenomenon as well.

I can't check it myself, but if we're comparing OC Authority, mine should be a lot higher than Rina-sempai. This should be the case, but sempai was able to hold her own against me while we're neck and neck with each other, so it's likely because of the amazing amount of training she underwent every single day. During these two years, Eugeo and I had been training, whether it was day or night, but it was not on the level of the monstrous training sempai went through that would make anyone tremble. That sort of training raised her strength and also a 'power' that couldn't be indicated through values.

However, the scariest thing was that, even when there was someone like her, she was only the second ranked amongst the 12 elite swordsmen— In other words, there was the fact that one other person was ranked above her.

Eugeo and I would be taking part in the advancement exams for elite swordsmen next month. It seemed that the 12 people with the top grades would be given the rank of a «Swordsmanship Specialist» as elite swordsmen. It would be a must for us to become swordsmen, and we had to be the top and second ranked. If not, we would not be able to attend the Emperor's Imperial Competition, officially known as the «Norlangarth Imperial Swordsmanship Tournament», after we graduate.

In this 2 year course within this Swords Academy, each year had 120 students. In other words, Eugeo and I would have to beat the other 118 students— To be honest, on thinking Rina-sempai wasn't the «Number 1» even when she's so strong, I did feel a little, no, strongly anxious...

"—You've improved, Kirito."

Suddenly, she muttered to me from a very close distance, seemingly having read my thoughts. I shook my head slightly, maintaining the pressure I was exerting when I couldn't let go.

"No... I still have a long way to go."

"Aren't you being humble there. You have more or less learned how to deal with my whip."

"That's because you never held back."

On hearing that answer, the bewitching lips showed a slight smile.

"I have no need to hold back against you, Kirito. That's because this is the final... your «Aincrad Style» has some moves I have not yet seen."

Uuu. I couldn't help but stop myself from talking. My sword was forced back by 5cm, perhaps because I was wavering, and Rina-sempai pressed down on me from above.

Her navy blue eyes stared at me, seemingly sealing away the gloom in her as she continued,

"A year ago, when I anointed you as my valet, I felt something like a sword style. It was completely different from the Norlangarth style the Academy demanded... that this sword style was not for show, but for winning. The Serlut style I use is trying to develop towards the goal of practical use, but it's too rigid compared to your style, Kirito. I understood that during this past year."

I could only widen my eyes at my opponent who made this confession.

The use of the sword skills was different, if I have to say it, and that's true. I'm not someone from the Underworld. My sword skill is named as an Aincrad-style because those were all learned in that floating city, in the world of that death game where we had to risk our lives for all the actual battles.

In contrast, there were basically no actual battles in the Underworld. All the battles were done in a «competition». In a local contest, it would be when one side was cornered, and for the higher level contests in Central, the one to hit first would win. With no risk to life, it was logical for sword skills to be developed for an aesthetic ideal.

However, this did not mean that the sword skills of the swordsmen in the Underworld were inferior. This was also something I learned in the past two years. As long as they continued to practice the same «style» countless times, the power of each hit they spent so much time refining could make up for the lack of live combat experience.

This was all because of the power of the «Imagination».

Underworld was a virtual world, but the construct was completely different from Aincrad. In this world, the strength of the imagination created by the souls— the Fluctlights, would sometimes affect the results.

How strong would someone be by using the imagination of a swordsman to practice the same skill over and over again for 10, 20 years since youth... On the other hand, I, who had an advantage in OC authority, was forced back by Rina-sempai like this in the current situation, which showed this to be true. The power of imagination was not shown numerically, but it was a real power that was hidden in this world. It was something neither I, who woke up to this world for merely 2 years, nor Eugeo, who started training his swordsmanship at the same time, could easily grasp.

The students in the academy were mostly born in the houses of the «Nobles», elites who started learning the art of swordsmanship ever since 3, 4 years old. Even so, only a small group would spend the time and effort to actually practice. In this situation however, Eugeo and I had to beat the sturdy swords of these strong people head on and aim for the top seat of the year.

Because of this, the only weapon I could rely on was the Aincrad-style— the sword skills.

As for why the sword skills existed in Underworld, I had no idea why, even till now.

However, it looked like the swordsmen in this world only knew the basic single-strike skills, or rather, they could only use such skills.

One year ago, during the Zakkaria Tournament, the apprentice guard Egome used the Zakkalight style «Azure Wind Slash». In SAO sword skill term, it would be the one-handed diagonal attack «Slant». The Serlut-style move Rina-sempai used just now, the «Linker», was the two-handed spinning sword slash «Cyclone». Other moves I saw were Norlangarth-style «Lightning Slash», which was the one-handed sword skill «Vertical», while the high level Norlangarth skill «Heavens and Mountains Break» was the two-handed vertical slash «Avalanche».

These were all the secret moves of each school, and it seemed that there was no super move that would be like an ultimate move. Then, the two, three consecutive hit attacks I mastered may be a weapon that could match up against the sturdy swords of those elite swordsmen here. It was just a guess for now, but I had to say that it was somewhat despicable. However, we're not here to steal the honor of the strongest in the human world. We just wanted to step through the gates of the Axiom Church's Centoria Cathedral that was located on a hill several kilometers away from the Master Arts Academy, the large tower that was absolutely out of bounds to us.

In order to let Eugeo meet with Alice who was taken at a young age.

And I wanted to meet the «Governor» of this world.

If we could finish our aims, it wouldn't matter even if people labeled us as despicable during all the tournaments. I would take part in all the high level swordsmanship tournaments I knew of, and continued to win, until I become the best in the Four Empires Unity Tournament and obtain the right as an «Integrity Knight».

This was the reason why I sealed off my moves that were more than two consecutive hits during the one year since I enrolled into this Academy. What I just used was merely the «Rage Spike» Charge skill.

However, it seemed that this beautiful senior saw through that dastardly secret move of mine,

Rina-sempai again brought her face closer by another centimeter, and whispered in a softer voice as if it was a secret.

"The Serlut family's ancestors made the Emperor unhappy in the past, and from there on, they were forbidden from inheriting the traditional sword skill «High level Norlangarth style». Thus, we started using unorthodox weapons like whips and daggers, and spent lots of time relying only on the

gentle sword skill that's not forceful. This is the Serlut-style... Don't be mistaken, I'm definitely not unhappy here. I'm proud to be the only inheritor of this style, and had been training till today..."

The white slender hands trembled slightly, unlike what she just said. The wooden swords that were clashed let out a clear rattling sound. Even though this might be a chance to pull my sword back, I did not do so as I continued to maintain this posture to wait for her next words.

"And my father hoped that I graduate as the top ranked student from this Academy and win during the Imperial tournament to regain the prestige of the Serlut family. However, isn't this quite the irony? If I answer my father's expectations and get the Emperor to revoke the ban on the high-level Norlangarth style... our family would give up on the Serlut style, right? If that's the case... What's with that honor I cherished ever since I was young?"

I couldn't make a quick response to this question.

Recently, my consciousness had become somewhat faint, but I felt that Rina-sempai in front of me, my important partner Eugeo, all the students and instructors in this Academy... and all the people living in Underworld were different kind of humans from me in a certain sense. They were just given the term «Human Units» in this virtual world Underworld.

Even so, they were different from the NPCs in current VRMMO. They were «Artificial Fluctlights», copied through the Fluctlight of the human souls and preserved in a special medium. They were— most likely, they were the brand new Artificial Intelligences of some certain organization in the real world, probably the enigmatic investment enterprise «RATH»—

However, their show of emotions would sometimes be greater than those of people in real life. They would simply sense, feel bothered, accept or take on the fates this world would give them head on. When I saw them like this, I felt that it was impossible not to be agitated. Their existence... No, the existence of this Sortiliena-sempai who's clashing with me at close range is basically like a miracle...

"...Sempai."

On hearing these words, Rina-sempai showed a slightly self-mocking smile.

"I always had such a doubt in my heart before I entered this Academy. During these two years, I had never been able to beat that guy, and that may be because I felt so lost."

«That person» would refer to the top elite swordsman who had never changed his rank this year, a guy called Uolo Levanteinn. He was from a second class noble family who inherited his family's tradition of being trained by the Norlangarth Empire Knights, an intimidating Mighty Sword user. The imagination and power from this guy's overhead cleave were top notch. I saw him use a wooden sword to slice a round log in half.

The elite swordsmen, the best in this Academy were all given the rank from top to 12th. This rank would change during the examinations that were held 4 times every year.

Of course, I had been watching at the nearest grandstand seat for the last three tournaments. They used an elimination tournament similar to the Zakkaria tournament and reduced the number of people from 12 to 3 within 2 rounds. The one who was ranked highest before the tournament would be seeded. During the three decisive finals, Rina-sempai fought the Chairman Uolo, and lost all three times to him.

As far as I saw, their swordsmanship abilities differed completely. Rina-sempai used a gentle sharp style as compared to the sturdy Chairman Uolo. She nullified the extremely powerful strikes like running water, and would occasionally carry out sharp counterattacks. Sempai's skill was basically perfect. Both of them were never able to carry out any successful attack, but just when time was about to run out, Uolo would use the high level Norlangarth overhead cleave attack, and during these three times, Rina-sempai was never able to take the attacks. The wooden sword was sent flying twice and snapped once.

The judges' decisions were needed to decide all three matches, and it was obvious that they would choose Uolo as the winner. Thus during this year, Uolo was the chairman, and sempai remained as the vice-chairman, a position that was never changed.

On a side note, the 3rd ranked had never changed before. He was a hulking guy, Golgosso Valto, who always lost to Rina-sempai in the semifinals. To add on, the one who became Golgosso-sempai's valet was my good friend Eugeo.

The 'this is the final' Rina-sempai mentioned before the start of this training referred to the 4th «Graduation Contest» that would be held 2 days later. This would be the final ranking. Two days later, these high level trainees that included the twelve elite swordsmen would graduate.

In other words, the tournament two days later would be the last chance for Rina-sempai to overtake Uolo-sempai. To be accurate, the first two would have the right to participate in the «Imperial Swordsmanship Tournament». She could possibly meet Uolo there, but I feel that sempai, who had been losing to him at school, would not be able to beat him.

"...I'll be honest here."

Rina-sempai continued to keep her sword clashed with mine as she kept her voice down and said to me,

"Whenever I saw that guy's «Splitting Wave of Heavens and Mountains»... I would be scared. No matter how many times I trained, I didn't have the belief that I could take a hit from that Mighty Sword. Ever since the time when we were rookie trainees... No, ever since the time when I first saw that guy's sword during that entrance exam two years ago, it had always been like that..."

This was the first time I saw sempai like this, and as I felt shocked, I earnestly agreed.

As expected, there wasn't any difference between sempai and Uolo's ability. It was only the power of Imagination... How strong her self-confidence was, this one important factor she was lacking.

As I deduced, if Underworld was a virtual world formed by «Mnemonic Visual Data», the power of imagination should become an important factor in deciding the results of events. That was because Rina-sempai and I saw that what we touched were not polygons, but «memory imagination» obtained from Fluctlights.

Each person should have their unique, slightly different imagination data, right...? Maybe the data released by multiple Fluctlights could be placed in a «Main memory holder» and evened out. Then, if such Fluctlights appeared, the power of imagination released would be enough to affect the data, and it wouldn't be hard to imagine that events were changed by personal will.

Using the example of Uolo Levanteinn, the reason why this Mighty Sword user was so strong was because of this. He had absolute confidence in his sword skills and his style. His imagination was led by this firm will, and it was because of such imagination that he was able to show such tremendous attack power.

In contrast, Rina-sempai always felt somewhat lost about her own sword skills. The reason was because of the Serlut-style she mentioned before. The high level Norlangarth style was forbidden from being passed on, so they could only create their own style as a replacement. This recognition caused her to have a form of «Inferiority» in her heart. Because of this, it couldn't be helped that she was defeated by Uolo-sempai, who had absolute faith in his own sword skills... It was probably like this.

However, I wanted to let Rina-sempai win this time. This wasn't because of how the world's composition and imagination would be rewritten, but that I wanted her to stand proudly and graduate from this Academy. Sempai had the right and privilege to do so. During this year, amongst the 12 elite swordsmen, sempai—

"...Sempai, you spent much more time than anyone to train rigorously, including Chairman Uolo. Even that's not enough for you to gain confidence...?"

On hearing my words, Rina-sempai went silent for a short moment, and gently shook her head.

"Yeah... Looks like it's still not enough. The more I practice the Serlut style, the more I kept thinking. What will happen if it was not a sparring of wooden swords, but through steel swords; what will happen if whips and daggers can be used. If these could be used, there would be no need to worry about being careless against the Norlangarth style. But these were all excuses. In this Human World, real sparring... real battles definitely wouldn't happen. Until I stop giving these excuses for my failures, I'll never be able to take Uolo's sword strike head on..."

Before I could even respond to these words, sempai smiled slightly and continued,

"But you're different, Kirito. I couldn't find any sense of inferiority in you even as you're a user of a unique style. I had been watching right beside you during this year, and I finally understood this reason. I said it before just now... That's not all to your «Aincrad Style», right? There should be

some more amazing skills you have, so your heart never wavered. It's like that thing you mentioned before, the large tree located in the forest of your hometown... that Gigas Cedar."

Unknowingly, our arms relaxed as our wooden swords clashed with each other. Even so, sempai didn't move her body back; or rather, she was tilting her body forward, trying to use the strength of her body to press down on me. She then said fluently in a voice that was rather deep for a woman.

"That tree was already planted in your heart, I suppose. No matter how strong the winds are, it will not bend, and continues to look up at Solus in the sky... Kirito, I want to see that power you're hiding."

"..."

"This has nothing to do with the match against Uolo. It's just that, I want to see... No, I want to know. I want to know all about you as a swordsman before I graduate from this Academy."

Deep within the twilight blue eyes, little stars seemed to sparkle right in front of my eyes.

The beautiful face that looked like it could take anyone's soul away was only 5mm away from me before I realized it. At this moment, a slight pain happened right in the front of my hair, causing me to recover sharply. I blinked and started to think again.

I never showed Rina-sempai the «amazing» Aincrad style, the high level sword skills, but not because of some petty reason like using it as a secret weapon.

That was because I couldn't use it with this level 15 wooden sword that was used for competitions and training. The most I could use was the 2 consecutive hit skills «Snake Bite» and «Vertical Arc». No matter how much I tried, I couldn't use 3 consecutive hit skills. I tried it with a metal sword of the same level, but it was the same. I could only use the 4 consecutive hit sword skills when I was equipped with the level 45 Divine Tool «Blue Rose Sword» that chopped down the Gigas Cedar. I still didn't know why, but there was no such restriction in the old SAO.

Anyway, since sempai wants to see me give my «all», I can't just bluff through with the 2 consecutive hits. Thus, there's only one way left. I have to borrow the Blue Rose Sword from Eugeo, and at this point, I could use the strongest 4 consecutive hit skills with that sword.

If I asked Eugeo, he would definitely agree, but to be honest, I'm still somewhat hesitant. The Blue Rose Sword belonged to Eugeo, and the sword had the soul of a swordsman. This belief was already ingrained deeply in my mind. For some reason, I couldn't imagine myself using my best skills because of this conscious restriction of this idea that it was a borrowed item. However, I couldn't borrow the swords with highest priority from the Academy's armory, and those weren't my swords.

It can't be helped then. Looks like I have to borrow the Blue Rose Sword. I made this decision and said,

"—I understand. But sorry, please give me one day. Tomorrow, at the same time, I'll definitely show you... the best sword skills I can show."

Once I finished, Rina-sempai's lips showed a slight smile on her face, but seemed to quickly realize something as she frowned,

"But it's a rest day tomorrow. Training is forbidden. You can't use this training arena."

"...This isn't training."

I answered. For some reason, sempai showed a somewhat intrigued expression as she tilted her head,

"Then, what is it?"

"Eh, to put it..."

I rearranged my words slightly and said out what I thought,

"It's a gift. You taught me a lot of things during this one year, sempai. I heard that there's a tradition in the Academy, that the valet has to give the senior a gift on the day before graduation. I'll give you a sword skill, sempai. If it's a gift, it'll be fine even if it's a rest day."

These words of mine caused sempai to show a little wry smile.

"You never changed at all. I never heard of using a sword skill as a graduation gift before... But at this point, I might as well tell you this..."

"Eh... What is it?"

"The truth is, the fact that I named you as my valet would be a breaking of tradition. It's a stupid tradition here... that «Noble children have to choose other nobles of a lower class when choosing a valet». When I named you, many noble representatives came to the swordsmen trainee dorm to protest."

"Fufufu." Rina-sempai let out a slightly weird laugh, but my lips couldn't help but become numb as this was the first time I heard of such a thing...

The nobility sempai was referring to was the special class of the Norlangarth Empire, all of them ranked from «First class Nobility» to «Sixth Class Nobility», and ranked above them would be the royal family. Chairman Uolo's Levanteinn family was of Second class Nobility, while the Serlut family was of Third class. In other words, they were of a higher position than the Zakkaria leader's family that were of Fifth Class.

In contrast, the me in this world (and in real life) was an ordinary civilian amongst civilians, and undoubtedly, I would be the lowest class of the population. If we're talking about someone who's not a noble, but very famous in the social world and had lots of land— I would have to mention the chief of Rulid Village, Gasupht Schuberg, and Banou Wolde, whose house Eugeo and I resided in. These had family names after their own names, but the lowest of the lowest people weren't even allowed to do so.

It was only after Eugeo and I managed to enroll in the Imperial Master Sword Academy that most of the students here were mostly nobles and children of rich merchants; those of common birth formed only 20% of the whole. It was a complete double standard during enrollment. Eugeo and I

had to spend half a year getting the Zakkaria captain's recommendation letter required for the examination, but once I realized that the nobles could take part without any conditions, I felt like sending a letter of complaint to the Liberal Arts Department.

Anyway, once I got enrolled, in terms of school rules, the nobles weren't treated any differently from those of common birth... But there was an invisible difference. I (and Eugeo was most likely the same), spent a year ignoring the rumors others spread, but I never thought once that this was because Rina-sempai chose me as her valet.

"Since... Since there was such a custom, why did you still choose me...? If it were based on entrance ranking, there were 6 others above me. They're all nobles, so if you chose one of them, there probably won't be any disputes..."

"But those 6 merely earned points through performances, right? I have no interest in the beauty of the style. To me, your performance was the most exciting instead of what the testers chose... No, instead of it being exciting, I should say..."

Rina-sempai did not continue as she shut her mouth, showed a slight smile, and continued,

"...At this point, I won't say why I chose you. That's because I'll be graduating soon. More than that, let's talk about tomorrow. If the gift you're going to give me is a display of the Aincrad-style secret moves, I'll gladly accept it, Kirito."

"Ah, ye-yes. Glad that you'll like it."

"...However, I'm a little concerned. Based on the explanation you gave just now, it seemed that you decided on things here because you forgot that you had to give me a gift— I suppose I can interpret it this way..."

"No, of course not, how can that be! I had been thinking of that ever since the beginning. Really!"

I hurriedly denied it. "That's it for now then." Rina-sempai showed a cool expression, and it changed,

"We'll leave that for later. It's time to decide the winner in our match."

"Eh? —Ah."

At this point, I remembered that we're still in a sparring match. However, before I could even make a proper response, the wooden swords that were slightly touching each other slightly gave a strong feedback. It wasn't a sword skill, but rather, one of the few parrying skills of the Serlut style «Still Water» that was used to blow the opponent away while the swords were touching.

I jumped back forcefully, not taking this hit head on. Unlike the «Active Water» move from before, the «Still Water» would give a very strong burden to the legs, and after use, there would be a short pause. Also, sempai didn't have the whip in her left hand.

Let's end this with a forward leap. I landed, and raised my sword high up.

At this moment, I felt a chill down my spine.

Rina-sempai was definitely wielding the wooden sword with both hands— But the whip that was supposed to be behind her disappeared. Where exactly did it disappear to!? I widened my eyes, but I couldn't stop my sword skill. The one handed charge attack «Sonic Leap» was activated, and the blade let out a blue glow...

At exactly the same time as the sword skill was activated.

Rina-sempai's left hand moved away from the wooden sword and reached above. She looked like she grabbed onto something as she then swung it out. A white snake-like thing came flying out from her palm, right at me, wrapping around my body that was about to charge in.

The whip I thought flew far away was actually at the ceiling above the court. It had been dangling there while our blades were clashed.

As I realized this, I fell backwards and the back of my head slammed into the floor.

I blankly stared at the stars that appeared in my sight, and seemed to sense a deep sigh 'haa' coming from my forehead.

Part 2

The Norlangarth Imperia, the largest city in the Human World «Centoria» was a fortified city surrounded by a circular wall 10km in diameter... or in the units in this world, 10 kilolu.

The first level of the floating city of Aincrad was also a circle with a 10km diameter. In other words, these two large areas are exactly the same area and shape. This city had a size that was inexplicable for a city in the virtual world, and the population here was over 20,000.

Also, this city had a rather unique structure. The sturdy city walls that meet in an X intersection divided the streets into 4 areas. To put it in another perspective, these 4 walls that intersect at right angles formed a fan shape as they gathered.[4] What was most shocking was that these four cities were all called «North Centoria», «East Centoria», «West Centoria» and «South Centoria», the capitals of the 4 Empires that ruled the vast Human World.

In other words— the capitals of the 4 Great Imperials were all in the middle of this Human World, all separated by a mere wall.

I was shocked once I realized this. The king and the main army, the Knights' Headquarters, would definitely be there in the capital. Wouldn't it skip straight to the final battle if a war breaks out? — I nearly said these words to Eugeo, but managed to stop myself. In this world, where thieving, let alone killing wouldn't happen at all, it would be impossible for wars to happen between the Empires.

Even though an identification handprint was needed to cross the large marble wall —seemed like it was called the «Immortal Wall»— on closer look the North Centoria we're in had quite a few black-haired Eastern Empire people, tanned Southern Empire people and skinny Western people who were merchants or tourists. They were all foreigners, but maybe owing to the shared language (though there were some accents), there were no disputes between them.

I couldn't even feel animosity against other countries, let alone war. The reason for this was definitely the pure white tower that was standing at the center of the Capital, the center of the Human World.

The Axiom Church's Centoria Cathedral.

The top always looked to be shrouded, seemingly melted within the sky, so I could not see exactly how many hundred meters tall it was. It probably looked very majestic when viewed from the bottom, but the squarish Church ground was surrounded by the tall walls as well, so it would be impossible to peek inside. The «Immortal Wall» that stood in the center of the streets of Centoria was connected tightly to the four corners of the

white Cathedral walls... or rather, it would be more appropriate to say that the walls extended out from the Cathedral.

On a side note, this Immortal Wall not only covered the streets of Centoria. It also reaches through the city walls, extends out through the grasslands, forests, deserts, all the way to the bottom of the endless «Mountain Range at the Edge», 750km away. Naturally, this world did not have construction machinery or anything like that, so it was scary imagining exactly how much time and manpower was required to build this wall.

That meant that the authority of the Axiom Church was absolute.

This magnificent tower, this castle, where one could see the 4 Empires the Kings lived in from above, stood in the middle of the Human World. Perhaps, in this Underworld, the designation between people of different countries was about the same as the «residents of Tokyo» and «residents of Saitama» to me— that was the feeling I had.

Then, exactly what was the need to divide the Human World that did not have even 100,000 people into 4 Countries? My mind had this question, and up till now, I still hadn't found an answer. At the same time, I had no idea why there was an Axiom Church that existed above the countries.

In the Axiom Church, there were civil officers like «priests» and «patriarchs», and also military officers called the «Integrity Knight», but there weren't a lot of them. It seemed that there were less than 100. Rina-sempai told me this before. In contrast, the total number of knights and soldiers in the 4 Empires was around 2000 people. However, there were no records of the kings rebelling against the Church before... Was this because even the kings couldn't go against the Church and the Taboo Index? Or that several Integrity Knights were still stronger than the army of 2000? Or is it a combination of both—?

The majesty of the Centoria Cathedral that grew into the sky could be seen anywhere in the campus of the Master Arts Academy. Once I ended my final practice-in-name with Rina-sempai, I walked out of the elite swordsmen dorm quickly, through this still slightly cold spring evening, and looked up at the large white tower that was dyed orange and blue afar.

At this point, is the observer, who's standing on the roof of that tower and looking down at this Human World, someone from the real world like me? Or is he too a person of Underworld, an Artificial Fluctlight? Even if our plan could be carried out successfully, it will take another year and a half

for me to find the answer to this question. Of course, if the acceleration of 1000 times occurred without a hitch, only 10 hours would have passed in reality, but it was still a long time from my perspective.

It had been 2 years since I awoke in the forest near Rulid village. During these two years, I had been hounded with countless sleepless nights that caused me to tremble, by the anxiety over the lack of grasp on the situation and the yearning to meet Asuna, Suguha, my parents and my friends.

But at the same time— I had a bit of fear about finding the «exit» at the top of the Cathedral. Once I logged out from this world, it would mean that I would be saying goodbye to the many people in this world. Selka and the other children I had not met for a long time, the few friends I made at school, Sortiliena-sempai who had been watching over me and trained me as her valet for this past year, and naturally, my one and only «partner» Eugeo.

Ever since a long time ago, I couldn't treat them as simple AIs. Other than the small difference of being in a different soul medium, they were humans like me too. We spent 2 years moving from Rulid to Zakkaria, and finally to Centoria, and I had a firm belief of this during this time.

No, it wasn't just a simple love of friendship with Eugeo and the rest. To this inexplicably wide and beautiful world, I...

I cut off my thoughts at this point, took a deep breath, and buried it deep within me.

I looked up at where I was headed, and an old looking building appeared in my sights. The stone building was 2 stories tall, and the roof was laid with green slate tiles. This was the dormitory where the 120 trainees of the Centoria Master Swords Academy lived.

If possible, I really wanted to leap into the roof of the second level to get back into my room to reduce the hassle, but according to the rules of the dormitory, I couldn't do so. Unlike the elite swordsmen dorm that was rather relaxed, this novice swordsman dorm and the intermediate trainee dorm that was located slightly further away had strict rules similar to the Knights of Blood in the old SAO.

I made up my mind and walked up the stone steps at the front entrance, being ever cautious as I pushed aside the doors of the dorm. I tentatively stepped into the entrance lobby, took 1, 2 steps in— and suddenly, there was a slight cough from the right side. Nerve-wracked, I turned over to look

at the source of the voice, and exchanged looks with the woman sitting behind the counter. The tea colored hair was tied up properly, and her appearance was the embodiment of the term 'stern'. She was on the older side of 25 here.

I put my left arm as close to my waist as possible, put my right fist on the left side of my chest, gave a 'Knight's Salute', and loudly declared,

"NOVICE TRAINEE KIRITO HAS RETURNED BACK TO THE DORM!"

"...But it seemed that you were later than the specified time by 38 minutes."

Watches didn't exist in this world, so humans could only check the time through the «Bells of Time-Telling» located all over the city, including the Academy, which chimed every 30 minutes. Normally, one would require a specialized high level spell to accurately tell the time, but for some reason, she— Miss Azurika, the dorm supervisor, seemed to be using some outside system skill or something else to know that the time was 5.38pm.

I kept my Knight's salute, lowered my voice by quite a bit, and answered,

"That's because I received extended teachings and practical tips from my mentor, elite swordsman Serlut."

On hearing these words, Sister Azurika stared at me with her blueish-grey eyes. Whether it was the stern presence that surrounded her or the seemingly familiar name, I was reminded of a certain person. I once thought of asking her before I leave "Do you have a relative in the North called Sister Azariya?", but unfortunately, I hadn't had the chance to do so. Whenever I talked to her, I would most likely get a reminder or a warning, like now,

"...It can't be helped since a valet trainee's duty is to accept the guidance of a swordsman. But Novice Trainee Kirito, perhaps you never used it as a duty, but as an excuse for coming home late... You never cleared this suspicion throughout this past you."

On hearing this, I moved away from my Knight's salute, put my right hand behind my head, stretched my muscles and forced a smile,

"You-You really like to joke around, Miss Azurika. My aim is only in improving my sword skills, you know? Coming back late is just a side effect. I never intended on it being my main motive, definitely not!'

"I see. So you spent a year working so hard until you broke the curfew limit. Looks like you might have trained yourself to such a refined extent. If you really want to see the results of your training, I'll be really glad to be your sparring partner, you know?"

"Hukk." I froze again the moment I heard this.

Miss Azarika's Sacred Task was to be the 'North Centoria Master Swords Academy, Novice Trainee Dorm Supervisor', and not as a swordsmanship instructor. However, the adults in this Academy were basically all graduates here, so in other words, their proficiency in sword skills weren't ordinary. Every single student here knew that students who didn't break the rules, but did something against them, would be given a horrifying special remedial by her, a Nolgea-style user.

Then, what would happen if there were students who broke the rules— Luckily, such things would not happen. The people living in this world, the Artificial Fluctlights had a unique trait of 'being unable to resist a superior rule'. There was only one exception, me, someone of a different Fluctlight medium.

On thinking about it, it had been a miracle that I never once broke the school rules during this past year. I swallowed this thought that I had nearly spat out, and shook my head hard.

"No, why would I dare to bother you, Azurika-sensei? I just finished my first year of training."

"Really? Then, let me see the results of your training once you finish your second year course."

"...Yes, definitely."

I had to lower my head and pray earnestly that she would forget about this during the next year as I took a step back. Miss Azarika finally turned her eyes back onto the document in her hands and said,

"It'll be dinner time in 17 minutes. Try not to be late."

"Ye-Yes! Please excuse me!"

I finally bowed, quickly turned around, and dashed up the large stairs on the front side at the maximum speed allowed. Eugeo and I live in room 206 on the second level. There were 10 people living in the room, but the other 8 guys were all somewhat good guys. Those from room 106, where the

girls live, and this room 206 were all students with commoner backgrounds. The remaining 100 people were all children of nobility and rich merchants. This was to prevent some awkward interactions in the room... and some other reasons like this. I fluidly avoided the students who were chatting and laughing away in the corridor as they headed towards the cafeteria, opened the door on the far end of the west side, and the moment I walked into the room—

"You're so slow, Kirito!"

A voice greeted me.

Naturally, the one who spoke was the partner sitting on the second to last bed on the right...no, the partner who had stood up, Eugeo.

The body that stood up as he put his hands on his hips was about 3cm taller than 2 years ago, and the physique was a lot sturdier. This was to be expected, since he turned 19 this year— However, that gentle face and the glint in those green eyes never changed at all ever since the time I first met him. During these two years, there were many unhappy events, whether it was during the latter half of the first year in the Zakkaria guards squadron, and the second year when we were learning in this Academy, but that steadfast and upright soul of his never showed a single moment of twistedness.

In contrast, if we're talking about me, I never changed personally, but the scary thing was that my physique had changed just like my partner. I got taller, and my muscles got firmer. I was 17 when I fell into this world. In other words, that meant that there had been a 2 year time difference between me in the real world and me in the Underworld.

After I spent 2 years in SAO before escaping, I went through a rather distinct discomfort, but as I looked at things at this point, it seemed that I might have to spend 3—4 years before getting out... as I continued thinking about such things in a corner of my mind, I walked towards my partner, made a 'sorry' hand gesture with my right hand, and then spoke up,

"Sorry for making you wait. My training with Rina-sempai this time was extra long..."

"...Well, it's the last time today, so it's not like I don't understand."

Eugeo glanced at me as he said. After that, he suddenly showed a slight smile.

"But in fact, I too was late by 12 minutes. I got too engrossed in talking with Golgosso-sempai while in his room."

"What, so you were just upstairs... But that's kinda unexpected. I thought Gosso-sempai would definitely be someone who would use swords to give his final teachings."

I walked by Eugeo, got to the innermost bed that was near the wall and built together with a desk, and put my gloves, elbow pads and knee pads into the drawer. If this were the real world, the protective gear for kendo would soon give a disgusting odor if I left it like this, but there wasn't a need to worry about such a thing when bacteria didn't exist in this world. The uniform that was thoroughly soaked in sweat due to practice just now dried up unknowingly — even though Rina-sempai never sweated at all right from the beginning till the end.

After finally freeing myself from the weight, I lifted my head, and Eugeo gave a wry smile as he answered.

"You shouldn't view Gosso-sempai that way, he actually focuses a lot on theory too... No, it's not right to say that. He said that the mental and aesthetic aspects are important too..."

"Ahh, I can understand that. The Valto style that guy uses feels like it focuses more on one-hit-beatdowns compared to the Nolgea style."

"That's right. The basis of our Aincrad style is to respond at critical moments. However, sempai often told me, 'Sometimes, swordsmen have to stake everything on their firm unshakeable momentum to let out a huge hit!' ...I guess this would be the last of the loose ends for today."

"I see. That might truly be the case. Now that you mention it, I did feel that your sword moves had become heavier recently... But if I say it, what about me if I combine the Aincrad-style where I have to respond at the crucial moments and the ever changing Serlut-style?"

—Both of us walked out of the room as we exchanged this conversation.

It seemed like the other 8 people from our room already left for the cafeteria since we couldn't see them in the corridor. In this dorm, the only rule about dinner would be that we had to finish our meals before 7pm, so

we could reach there slightly later than 6, but we would get into trouble if we miss the prayer before dinnertime. To the other students who were of noble birth, we're just 'arrogant guys who're of mere common birth, yet chosen to be one of the 12 valets'.

We accelerated to maximum battle speed and headed to the large cafeteria on the Eastern-most side. It was no mere coincidence that the commoner students' rooms were located the furthest from the cafeteria. I heard that the elite swordsmen trainee's dorms were similarly the furthest for commoners, but in April, we won't have to take this long road— I guess. That's because we were the top 12 students during the promotion exam at the end of the month, and our future roles as elite swordsmen trainees were confirmed.

At this moment, it seemed that Eugeo was thinking about the same thing as he softly spoke,

"...There are not many days to 'walk quickly down the corridor' left."

"Ahh, compared to here, the elite swordsmen trainee dorm is complete freedom... But Eugeo, there's something I'm still not used to regarding the life of an elite swordsman trainee..."

"I know without you telling me. It's about having a valet trainee, right?"

"Nice answer. I'm happy that I got to help Rina-sempai do things and accept her guidance... But if I stand in the position of a sempai..."

"Yeah... I don't know what will happen if a noble child becomes a valet..."

Both of us let out a long sigh.

At this moment, we finally finished walking down the long corridor. We pushed aside the door in front of us, and the buzzing atmosphere rushed out from within, surrounding us. The cafeteria occupied both the first and second level, and was the only common facility the guys and girls would use together. Most of the guys, who formed the majority of the 120 students, were sitting together at their tables, and the same goes for the girls, but in the middle, there were some highly skilled people of both genders chatting away and laughing. In that sense, there's not too much of a difference compared to the real world.

Eugeo and I hurriedly walked down the stairs, took the trays that had dinner served from the counter, and went to an empty table in a corner.

Then, the 6 o'clock bell rang. Seems like we weren't late. I heaved a slight sigh of relief.

The male student (naturally, a high ranked noble) who was the dorm master stood up and offered a prayer to the Axiom Church. All the students then called in unison «Awai Ardmina». I had no idea what these words were about at all. Finally, it was time to eat.

The dinner menu tonight was deep fried whitefish with vanilla sauce, salad, root vegetable soup and two buns. These weren't much different from the meals prepared by the Church in Rulid Village and the Zakkaria farm, so it was really surprising to see a school with a large number of nobles serving such wild food, but they didn't show any displeasure as they naturally tucked in.

That was because, even though they were nobles, their lifestyles were unexpectedly simple— or not. It seemed that the unique «Space Resource» in Underworld was the reason for this. To elaborate on this, there's the system, 'a limit to how many objects can be produced in a certain area'. That meant that they could only obtain a certain amount of crops, livestock, wild animals and fish during a certain amount of time, and the limit couldn't be broken through.

If the nobles hoarded a large amount of food, there will be some amongst the civilians who would starve to death. Their Life will be reduced. This was something the Taboo Index forbade, 'that other people's Life was not to be reduced without a valid reason', and even nobles or the kings couldn't do so. Thus, in this way, the insistence of having this kind of food is related to maintaining Life, and hoarding food was forbidden ever since the beginning... or so it seemed to be the case."

But even if they weren't demanding for food to be luxurious, it didn't mean that the nobles were all nice people.

"...That's really inspirationally envying, Lord Raios!"

The moment we inadvertently heard such words from behind us, Eugeo and I showed irritated looks.

"We spent so much toil and sweat cleaning the cafeteria, but some people just needed to come in leisurely and have their food. Isn't that really envious?"

Another voice said this line that was obviously meant for others to hear,

"Well, don't say that, Wanbell. The Valet Trainees must be working hard in areas we can't see as well."

"Kuku, that's true. I heard that valet trainees have to follow whatever their mentors tell them."

"If, we end up meeting some mentor of common background or some forbidden background, we won't know what we'll be forced to do."

We'll end up caught in their taunt if we react. That was why I merely turned my back on them and concentrated on moving my fork. But even though I managed to contain my outburst, I couldn't hold back my rage inside. If it were just Eugeo and me, fine, but their 'common background' here would refer to Eugeo's mentor, Golgosso-sempai, and the one with a 'forbidden' background was my mentor, Sortiliena-sempai.

Their patterns of finding trouble with us weren't limited to mocking our mentors. They had been trying to taunt us right from the beginning when they first said that 'some people just needed to come in leisurely'. Even though there were many other valet trainees here beside Eugeo and me, we were the only ones who came in just when it was about time for dinner. In other words, these taunts were already targeted at us.

We met several annoying guys in Zakkaria town before. During the Swordsmanship tournament, that Egome Zakkalight I fought had quite the standard in terms of being snobbish, but the way guys against us in this Academy twist their words really impressed me. This was one of the reasons why the idea that 'the residents in this world are all Artificial Fluctlights, AIs' was completely erased from my mind, and maybe it was because of the rich vocabulary they had.

"...Either way, just hang on for a few days."

The one who spoke up softly was Eugeo, sitting beside me and tearing the bread.

These words had the meaning of 'we're about to become trainee swordsmen, we're going to different dorms from those guys'. To Eugeo,

these might be some competitive words, but they weren't baseless thoughts.

Amongst the 120 Novice Trainees, only 12 would become «Valet Trainees», and they were all chosen by the 12 «Elite Swordsmen» second years from the top freshmen.

Once someone became a valet, there would be no need for them to clean the dorm or repair their equipment. However, after school, the valet had to head to the swordsman trainee rooms, their mentors' rooms, clean their rooms, serve them personally, and act as their sparring opponents.

None of the two who were saying these sarcastic words were named to be valets, which meant that they had worse grades than Eugeo and I during enrollment. During this one year, they had been fluctuating between the 20s and 30s, so it wasn't unreasonable for Eugeo to predict that they wouldn't be swordsmen trainees.

...But in fact, what was going on...?

I continued to mutter to myself deep within my mind as I raised my dinner knife, staring at the figures behind me that were reflected off the shiny silver blade.

The two guys that were sitting at a table slightly far away were continuing with their sarcastic conversation as they continued to look over. The one sitting on the left with grey hair combed behind, covering the back of the head, was called Wanbell Jezeku, and he should be a 4th class noble's kid. On the right, the student with his wavy blond hair tied behind was the eldest son of a certain 3rd class noble's son called Rainos Antinos. In this Academy, first class noble students didn't exist (it seemed that they could already hire a personal teacher and thus be their student at that point), and those of second class noble birth were Uolo Levanteinn and some others. Thus, 3rd class nobles were a rather respected group here.

However, not all high ranked noble students were like that. I didn't actually interact much with them, but Chairman Uolo was always a very silent warrior, and Rina-sempai, who was from a 3rd class noble family just like Rainos, was completely upright and civilized.

In any case, Rainos and Wanbell were completely of the 'young lords who were all talk and no bite' kind of people... But is that really all to them? I

had been wondering. I didn't know whether it was lucky of me or not, but I never had anything to say to time as I never fought them before, but there's a possibility that they were taking it easy during the periodic exams every 3 months... Even during the entrance exams.

Naturally, the reason why they did this was due to the fact that the top 12 students would all be chosen to be the valets to the elite swordsmen trainees. In this Academy, this would usually be an honorable thing, but for Rainos and the rest who undoubtedly were the most proud in school, they might be lowering their rank on purpose to avoid being asked by their mentors to do this and that.

Of course, this was some baseless guess, but in actual practice, I felt a chilling pressure after I saw their «styles». I felt that absolute self-conceitedness only those high-ranked nobles would have, and the power of imagination that came from within.

"...Oi Kirito, the plate's empty."

Eugeo jabbed me with an elbow, and I finally noticed it. I had been using the fork in my left hand to poke at the empty salad bowl that was already empty. I hurriedly put down the knife in my right hand and intended to slice the fried fish, but found that the fried fish had already disappeared unknowingly. It seemed that I was too focused on Rainos' group and didn't have time to enjoy the dinner time, the second moment when I was happiest. Hadn't I been baited by them?

And also, the thing that made me most happy, the training time with Rina-sempai ended today—...

No, not yet. My job as a valet ended officially today, but tomorrow, during the rest day, there's an important promise; The promise to show off my sword skills.

I finally remembered something important, put down my fork and knife, and brought my face over to Eugeo,

"Listen to me, Eugeo. I have something I want to say to you later. After dinner, come over to the courtyard with me."

"I see, okay. I was wondering how your 'flower garden' is doing now, Kirito."

"Fufu, it's doing well. Definitely able to make it in time for the graduation ceremony."

"Heh, looking forward to it."

Once we ended our whisper, we took our trays and got up. We went by Rainos' group that was still yapping away, leaving them behind, and we hurried ourselves as our noses were nearly numbed by the heavy animal-like fragrance they applied on themselves.

Once we returned our utensils to the counter, we walked out of the cafeteria and breathed hard at the same time.

The bell that rang a few minutes ago rang again, so right now, the time is just past 6.30pm. It's free time from now till 10pm, but we couldn't leave the dorm, and at 8pm, we had to return to our rooms. Thus, we could only carry out training or study during this time— But there was one more piece of homework I had to do after dinner everyday.

On the west side of the dorm (opposite to the cafeteria), there was a small door, and there was a small garden outside. The garden was surrounded by tall metal fences, and though there was no roof, it was still considered within the dorm.

The squarish garden was divided into 4 blocks of flower beds. Each flower bed had different plants, that were sprouting, or blooming. Some students were assigned to maintain these flowers, but these flowers were not simply used for viewing. These 4 kinds of flowers were catalyst materials used for Sacred Arts lessons. The flowers were planted every 3 months, so fruits could be cultivated all year. Once the dried fruits were crushed by the fingers, the Sacred power would be released from within, and the students use this Sacred power as a resource for Spell practice.

Of course, the Earth and the Sun continued to provide resources, but the Earth's power in the city was weak, and the Sun would be affected by the weather as well. There was a need for energy in forms other than Space Sacred Arts so that the 120 students every year could use their spells reliably.

Like how it was in spring at this point, the flowers that bloomed this season were the blue Anemones on the North East side. It seemed to be of high priority like the Marigolds in Summer, the Dahlias in autumn and Cattleya in Winter... In other words, they were flowers that gave the most resources.

Their importance could also be seen by how they kept the same name and appearance from their counterparts in the real world throughout the approximately 380 years the Underworld existed, where the lifeforms in it underwent quite a number of unique changes. However, I wasn't very sure whether even the ecosystem was based on reality.

Once these flowers wilted, they would bear ball-shaped fruit. Once someone used the fingertips to crush them, the green light (Sacred Power) would float out... So this didn't look like it had anything to do with real life.

During the Sacred Arts lessons, the teacher mentioned before that besides the «4 Great Holy Flowers», there was a miraculous plant called «Rose» that gave ample resources and would bear fruit several times every year. The civilians, and even the nobles and kings weren't allowed to plant them. If one wanted to see them, they had to head to the rare spots where they grow in mountains. Once I heard that, I realized that I never saw a real rose ever since I came into this world. In that case, there was a valid right for it to be used as the sign of a Sacred Tool.

I continued to stare and enjoy watching the beautiful Anemones as I immediately went through the cross-shaped pathway and headed west. There was a large metal shed at the end, and the shovels, hose and other gardening equipment were placed in there neatly.

At a reclusive spot in the shed, there was a small flower pot. Eugeo and I squatted down in front of it.

"Really, its growing well. Isn't it bearing fruit here?"

I nodded deeply once I heard my partner's words,

"Failed 3 times already. It will be great if it can bloom this time..."

What we grew in the flower pot was a plant with sharp leaves that was almost completely blue. Its name was Zephyria, and I guessed it was a rare plant in Underworld. It wouldn't release much resources, but it had a shocking amount of beauty...at least we thought it would. As for why we didn't know? That was because Eugeo and I and everyone in the Norlangarth Empire had never seen a real Zephyria before.

This Zephyria flower was a plant grown on the other side of the «Immortal Wall», a plant from the «Wesdarath Empire». No one planted this in the North Empire, let alone it growing wild here.

There are trades between the empires, though they aren't major, so it shouldn't be surprising to see flowers and anything related to planting. However, this wasn't the case. The reason was that there was no such Sacred Task like a «Flower Merchant», and the reason why it didn't exist was that 'flowers that can't be eaten should just be planted out of personal interest. It's a waste of Sacred Power to sell it'. There exist 'herb merchants', and they would plant seeds in the farms, but only the 4 Sacred seeds. The world revolves around making use of this ideology effectively.

Then, where did I get this pot of Zephyria flowers from—?

"I believe this is the last batch of seeds you got, right, Kirito?"

I nodded once I heard Eugeo's question.

"Ahh, this is the last... final chance. The uncle from the spice shop said that the next supply will come next autumn."

—Yes, even if no one sells flowers, there will be people selling seeds. When Zephyria seeds are ground into powder, they would let out a fragrant vanilla-like sweet smell. Thus, a few seeds would be imported from the West empire as a spice for some desserts... this was something I caught wind of last autumn.

At that time, I basically never did use my money, the salary I earned as a Zakkaria guard, so I bought as much as I could from the spice merchant —however, he had only a small bag of seeds— and tried to let them grow.

There were two reasons why I suddenly had an interest in gardening.

First, this was an experiment on this thing that's hidden deep within this world, the «Imagine System» I named.

The Spice Merchant uncle told me that Zephyria flowers definitely would not be able to grow in Norlangarth grounds. I thought of using the soil from the West Empire to grow it, and even ran all the way to the borders of the Central suburbs and dug some soil. However, the first seed I put in never grew, and soon, the Life dropped to zero as it disappeared in the flower pot. However, this wasn't decided by the people in the real world who designed and operated this Underworld. This flower was different from Anemones and Cattleyas and the like; it doesn't exist in the real world.

Then, why would Zephyria flowers grow in the West Empire, but not in the North Empire?

That's definitely because— the people in this world firmly believed so. The imagination which the residents called fettered knowledge caused the parameters of the «Zephyria» in the main memory to become like that. Then, if, if I had an imagination that was 10 times stronger than the «Common sense of the residents» and gathered them on these dozens of seeds, would I be able to rewrite the parameters, even if it was for just a while...?

Using one's own power to overcome many thousand people's worth of imagination may sound really far-fetched, but in fact, what would happen?

What I wanted to challenge was the old-fashioned common knowledge that had been spreading down through word of mouth ever since many hundred years ago. In today's Underworld, not a lot of people would be thinking Zephyria can only grow in the West Empire!...or maybe there might not even be one. In other words, the parameters of the Zephyria in the main memory didn't have a really powerful shackle.

Then, if I continued to repeat this every day, if I gather my imagination on them... No, if I prayed for them to bloom every day, wouldn't it be possible for me to overcome that old-fashioned common sense?

Having considered this, I started watering these flowers since last autumn with water and imagination.

At first, it failed, and I failed the second time. But on the third time, the seed sprouted by about 5mm. It was about to wilt, but this was already a result of breaking through the 'impossible'. I dumped all of the remaining seeds in this fourth experiment, and would come over here every day, before I go for classes in the morning, and after dinner, and muttered to them while gathering more concentration than before, saying "You definitely must sprout, grow and bear beautiful flowers."

Recently, if I muttered such things to them, I would occasionally see a faint glow from the tender sprout. No matter what, this should be my eyes...or my consciousness playing tricks on me, but I believed that that the 23 sprouts I see in this flower pot would definitely bear beautiful flowers.

"Here, Kirito. I got the water."

"...Ah, so sorry."

It seemed that Eugeo had filled the watering can for me while I was squatting down in front of the flower pot here. I thanked him, received the watering can, and my partner smiled at me as he said,

"But speaking of which, Kirito, we have been together for two years, but I didn't know you had such an interest."

"Yeah well, actually, I actually don't know why..."

This was just a random answer, and there wasn't any deep meaning behind it. However, Eugeo changed expressions as he went closer to me, before saying,

"Nope, this is a sign that you're recovering your memories. You probably grew flowers at home before you appeared in Rulid, Kirito... Or maybe your original Sacred Task was something like that or so."

On hearing that, I couldn't help but stare at my partner's face blankly. I then hurriedly cleared my throat and said,

"I-I see...why then? I have no knowledge of plants at all. All I did was learn from the pruner Miller and the rest."

I basically nearly forgot all about it, but I was a «Lost Child of Vector»... A human who had his memories taken by the Dark God Vector and thrown into a land far away from a village. In the Academy, my birthplace profile was recorded as Rulid, so Eugeo was the only student here who knew of my 'designation'. Also, he had never mentioned anything about my memories to me recently, so I thought he didn't mind anymore— but it didn't seem to be like that.

On hearing my answer, Eugeo nodded slightly, but didn't continue as he turned his stare to the flower pot,

"Alright, hurry up and water it. They're telling us to hurry up."

"Oh, so you can hear them speak now, Eugeo-kun?"

"Of course, I've been taking care of them with Kirito-kun."

That's all for jokes as I got ready in front of the flower pot and started muttering in my heart.

...The pot is rather small, but it's your country. Nothing can threaten you. You have to bask in the sunlight, take in the water and open up your moving flowers.

I let this imagination of mine enter the water in the watering can, and swayed my right hand slightly. The water droplets landed on the slightly blue thin stem and leaves of the Zephyria, moisturizing them, flowed down and disappeared in the black dirt.

At this moment, I seemed to see a warm glow surrounding the 23 stalks.

Is it an imagination like before? Or— as I thought about this, I turned to look at Eugeo beside me, but he seemed to have his eyes closed and didn't notice this. As I turned my gaze back to the flower pot, the white light disappeared without a trace.

I was really sorry to Eugeo, who was doing this with me for the sake of my interest (an excuse for an experiment), but I never told him that this was a Zephyria flower. He thought these were just some unknown seeds I got from the market.

The reason why I didn't tell him the truth was that if I told him, Eugeo's common sense would have eroded my imagination. The aim of my experiment wasn't to fight in a battle of wills against my partner, and this was definitely not my personal wish. To be honest, I was always afraid that when we have sparring exams between elite swordsmen trainees, I would have to face Eugeo...

"...Hey, Kirito."

Suddenly, I was called by Eugeo, who widened his eyes. I instinctively turned around to look, but, though this naturally wasn't a voice in my mind, what Eugeo said next was completely out of my expectations,

"Kirito, if you gain all your memories, what will you do after that...?"

"Eh...? What should I do? What do you mean?"

"You see, Kirito, you're working hard, learning to be a swordsman in this Academy... to finally become an Integrity Knight. You just need to accompany me to finish my goal, isn't that right? My aim is to get to Alice, who was taken by the Axiom Church 8 years ago, but... If you recovered your memories and think of your hometown..."

...You'll definitely want to go back, right?

Eugeo didn't say it out as he asked me with his eyes instead.

Do I want to go back to my hometown? —Naturally, my answer would be 'yes'. However, my hometown isn't anywhere in Underworld. The one place that had my house, where everyone's waiting for me, is a country called Japan in the real world, outside this world.

If I want to log out from here, I have to find the System Admin or the System Console or something like that. And if I have to guess where such things would be, that would be the Central department of the Axiom Church Centoria Cathedral. Thus, I had a different reason for becoming an Integrity Knight as compared to Eugeo.

I endured the urge to tell off my partner, no, my good friend, kindly; moved the empty bottle to his left hand and patted on his back with my empty right hand. I put my hand on his back and silently spoke up,

"...No, even if I really regain my memories, I won't go back. I definitely feel that I was once a «Swordsman» from where I came from... Even if I had an interest like planting flowers, wouldn't it be my ultimate goal to aim for the Centoria Four Empires Unity Tournament?"

"..."

On hearing my words, Eugeo's back let out a slight tremble.

He kept his small crouching position as he lowered his head with the flaxen-colored hair deeply and spoke in a barely audible voice.

"...I'm, really a weak person. If I had never met you under the Gigas Cedar, I would probably just be swinging my axe every single day. I would only use my Sacred Task as an excuse and never think of seriously leaving the village... and finally, forget about Alice..."

Eugeo stared at the brick beside him, and said out his inner thoughts with a teeny-weeny voice,

"...It was the same when I joined the Zakkaria guards, and the same when I was able to come to Centoria to take part in this Master Swords Academy. It's because you were in front of me that I was able to do so, Kirito. So at least... I have to be as strong as you before I graduate, Kirito, that's what I thought. But, when you said that you won't head back to your hometown even if you regained your memories... I felt relieved for a moment..."

My hand felt a jerk.

I exerted strength into my right hand, and started muttering silently like what I did to the flowers. You're very strong, you're the one who decided to leave the village for your goal in this world that has numerous laws, rules and all sorts of binds. I muttered.

"...I say, listen to me, I can't possibly head to Central alone."

As I muttered in my heart, I said this to him.

"I didn't know the way, I couldn't memorize the laws of the Empire... And most importantly, I didn't even have a single Shears. The reason why we were able to be in the Academy like this is because both of us had been together. It will be the same from today onwards. If we don't work together, we won't be able to beat those noble young lords and ladies and the elites of the Imperial Knights who started learning since the moment they learned to walk. It's too late to work hard alone and become an Integrity Knight."

"..."

Even after hearing my words, Eugeo remained silent. But after a while, he whispered back,

"Ahh... Ahh, that's right. We made it all the way here until now. So we have to get into that white tower."

"Yeah. For that, we have to get the top 12 in this month's periodic tests... Leaving aside practical skills, I really can't understand the Sacred Arts really well... Teach me about those suitable media that react once we get back to the room."

"...Haha, okay. We'll start with the «Compressed Power» immediately again."

"Sort-Sorta."

I patted Eugeo on the back and got up.

Eugeo, who got up a little later, was left with a usual calm smile. At this moment, my partner tilted his head, and seemed to remember something as he said,

"Speaking of which, what did you want to ask me in the canteen?"

"Eh...? Aah, ahh, yeah, I nearly forgot what I wanted to say."

I turned my body to face him, and spoke in my usual tone,

"Eugeo, can you lend me your «Blue Rose Sword» for use tomorrow?"

"Hmm, okay."

Eugeo agreed in a seemingly wholehearted manner as he nodded, and then tilted his head,

"But why? Didn't you say that it would be better to practice with the wooden sword because you felt that the feel would be off?"

"That's what I said but... It's like this. I promised Rina-sempai just now that I would show her my real sword skills for the last time. I probably could only use two consecutive hit skills with the wooden sword."

"Oh, so that's how it is. In that case, you must show off the real Aincrad-style fully. You can use the Blue Rose Sword, but..."

At this moment, Eugeo paused, and then said with a slightly perplexed expression,

"I say, Kirito, did you forget? Tomorrow's rest day would be that day."

"Eh? What about that day..."

"Oi oi, it's the 6th of March. You were so looking forward to it."

"...Ah, ahh, is that so? The day that thing's finished? ...Well, it's not that I forgot...but I didn't think that it would take a year...."

"Didn't you forget anyway?"

Ahaha, Eugeo laughed, and asked me again,

"So, how about it? The Blue Rose Sword, or..."

"No, I want to use my own sword. Looks like Stacia-sama had definitely been guiding me. You said you were willing to lend me the sword, sorry."

"It's alright. Then, let's go back to our room, alright? I'll teach you properly until it's lights out."

"...Plea-Please spare me."

I put the watering can back in the shed and ran off to catch up with Eugeo, who was walking out.

I turned back to look at the flower pot for the last time, and saw that at the top of the energetic sapling, the flower bud that had water droplets on it was pointing at the night sky.

The second reason why I decided to plant the Zephyria for this experiment— To be honest, I would hesitate whenever I thought about it.

That's because this reason was a little, no, rather embarrassing.

Part 3

In Underworld, there existed a wide array of Sacred Tasks, but amongst them, it's basically impossible to find something that belongs to the 'traveler' category.

The 'trade merchants' who crossed the country borders to do sales seemed similar to 'travelers', but it's a little tricky to describe their movements as traveling. That's because they only transported their goods from one corner of this circular Central to another, like from North Centoria to East Centoria, or the other way around. The distance was only about 5km at most.

The villages on the borders seemed to be self-efficient, and medicine or processed metal goods that they couldn't produce were all delivered from the closest towns by horse carriages (for example, it would be Zakkaria for Rulid). Sacred Tasks like «Traveling entertainer» and «Singing bard» didn't exist, so those who wanted to go for vacations during their free time would be obstructed by the one rest day per week limit.

The only exception would be the «Integrity Knights» that could fly a wyvern from Centoria to the Mountain Range at the Edge 750km, but that Sacred Task was too unique.

Thus, the residents of Underworld basically wouldn't move too far. However, this didn't mean that travelling itself was forbidden. They would be allowed to move far away as long as they followed their assigned Sacred Tasks like a Centoria furniture dealer moving to Zakkaria in the distant North. Besides, I myself followed the rule of this world and even went through an entire country.

In other words, it's all up to their personalities if they wanted to go on a journey or not. And as for personalities, 99% of the Underworld residents were all rather conservative.

However, it didn't mean that there wasn't anyone who had such a voracious sense of adventure.

One of them was a craftsman, Satore, who opened his shop in the 7th district of North Centoria.

"Take a look at this thing!"

As the coarse voice rang, several rectangular stone slabs were thrown right in front of Eugeo and me, letting out rattling sounds. The black stone tablets that had a delicate texture seemed to be whetstones from the Eastern Empire. However, right now, they were all worn down to less than 2cm thickness, and no matter what, it looked like they could not be used anymore.

"This black Corengan whetstone could be used for 3 years, but that thing of yours already broke 6 of mine!"

"Is-Is that so...I-I'm really sorry..."

I continued to earnestly apologize to the shopkeeper who was seething red as I looked around.

In this «Satore Metalcraft» shop, the metal appliances, ornaments and even weapons were all lined up. Amongst them, the most eye-catching would be the numerous swords hung on the walls deep within the store. Why would a mere handicraft store have swords? The first time Eugeo and I came here, we timidly asked this fierce looking owner. He himself gave a simple answer, "This old me wanted to be a metalworker, so this old me made swords."

I asked him about what the differences were between a metalworker and a handicraftsman in this world, and unexpectedly, the tools were the only things that were different. A metalworker uses a furnace, an anvil and a hammer to create a product. In contrast, a craftsman uses a chisel, a hammer and a rasp. In other words, it was just a difference of forging and carving.

In the real world, I used two kinds of tools, an «aluminum forge» and an «aluminum chisel» on my mountain bike, so I thought it was somewhat the same... and so when I randomly said that 'if they both produce swords, it's alright to ask a craftsman'. However, when I spoke up, the shop owner

Satore glared at me with an intense stare and said, "Even if the same kind of metal is used, the finished product won't be the same".

From the way he said this, it seemed that even if the exact same metal slabs were used, a sword that was forged under high temperature would have a higher priority (that Class Object number or something) than chiseling out a sword. Because of this, Satore seemed to be viewed as an 'impractical fake' when he started out making swords.

At that time, the adventurous and young Satore was burning with rage and motivation. He worked hard to prepare a year's worth of products, left his shop to his wife and apprentice, and went on a long journey to find a material that would create a better sword by chiseling than by forging.

But even though it was a journey, a craftsman would be unable to gain a permit to leave the country, so he could only move up to North Centoria. For several months, he went from town to town, village to village, found several prospective materials but they didn't meet his expectations. Finally he reached a large tree that seemed to grow into the clouds in the forest near the North border.

It was an impregnable pitch black large cedar tree that would not be burned even if fire was lit on it, and would break the blades of axes swung at it... of course, it was the «Demon's Tree» Gigas Cedar.

At that time, he met the «Cutter» old man Garitta (who should be young at that time) and became friends with him. He intended to snap a branch off the Gigas Cedar to collect the material for the sword, so he climbed up the tree with Garitta's help, used a rasp to try and grind at a branch he liked, but couldn't even make a slight cut for 3 days and 3 nights.

Satore broke down in tears as he gave up his thoughts, and told old man Garitta to notify him if this tree was cut down one day. At that time, he would definitely come back to this forest to get this branch.

Old man Garitta fulfilled Satore's wish in a slightly different manner.

Last March, when we finally reached the destination of our long journey, North Centoria, we followed old man Garitta's words and visited Satore's metalwork shop. Satore was speechless for 3 minutes when he saw the branch presented to him. He spent 5 minutes inspecting it, and then said,

—Give me a year. One year later, this branch will become an unbelievable sword.

—So unbelievable that the Integrity Knights' divine tools will not be able to match it.

And then, after a year— on the day, Human World Calendar Year 380, 7th of March, today, the owner greeted Eugeo and me, who visited this handicrafts shop, with a seething red expression.

"The-Then... Is-Is the sword finished?"

I timidly interrupted Satore's seemingly endless complaints as I asked.

Shut up. The shop owner who stared directly at me with his grey beard let out a snort and bent down. Satore took out a long and narrow clothed package from under the counter with both hands, exerted force from his sturdy body and used his strength to lift the clothed bag.

GONK! The cloth package let out a blunt sound as it laid on the counter. The shopkeeper didn't let go of it immediately.

He let the clothed package lie on his right hand, used his left hand to stroke his beard, and spoke,

"Young man, I still haven't talked about the payment."

"Ugh."

I was speechless. The Master Swords Academy is run by the country, so school fees were exempted. But during this time, I had been spending money on food or other stuff during my rest days, so I used up quite a lot of money I saved up in the Zakkaria guard squadrons. In this time, the fees for the sword (not to mention 1 year's worth of labor and 6 high class whetstones) didn't seem to be small here.

"...No worries, Kirito. I brought all my money here just in case."

I was really grateful for Eugeo's soft words behind me, but for some reason, I had a very bad feeling about it.

If, just if, our total fortune still wasn't enough to pay for this... would we be breaking the Taboo Index? Will the police, no, the Integrity Knights immediately come flying over to capture us and send us to jail...?

"—It's not like I can't charge you nothing."

After a long while, Satore finally said these words, so Eugeo and I had the urge to heave a long sigh of relief. However, right before that, he continued "But",

"...But, young man, you have to be able to wield this monster. This thing and the materials themselves were really heavy, and it looks like you have some ability to carry it all the way from the North to Centoria... but leaving aside that, this thing might have become heavier once it became a sword. Metalworkers and craftsmen are all protected by God Terraria, so no matter how outstanding a sword is, there should be no problems moving it... but even this old me could only lift it by 1 Mel even after giving it all I got."

"...A monster, huh?"

I muttered these words as I lowered my head to look at the clothed package.

Even with a very thick piece of sackcloth surrounding it, I could feel an existence that could distort space emitting from it. For some reason, I couldn't move towards this thing that seemed to me tempting me... or maybe it was my body being magnetized by it as I hesitated.

2 years ago, Eugeo and I embarked on our journey south in the midst of a resounding fanfare.

Eugeo had the Blue Rose Sword, which was kept in the drawer underneath the novice trainee dorm bed, strapped on his waist, and I had the pitch black tree branch I cut down from the Gigas Cedar. Old man Garitta directed me to ask the craftsman Satore to refine it, but for that moment, I was controlled by the urge whether or not I should bury it deep within the forest.

Even till now, I still couldn't understand why. Logically, it would be more convenient for two swordsmen to each have swords instead of having to share one between them, and much more natural. Thus, I should be happy that there was a way to create a sword that rivaled the Blue Rose Sword instead of fearing it.

I shook off this slight premonition with my sense of logic as I brought the Gigas Cedar branch to Centoria and handed it over to Satore.

And then, on this day, a year later, the branch finally became the form of a sword, waiting for me to make first contact with it under the sackcloth.

I took a deep breath, sighed out for a long while, and reached out my left hand. I grabbed it together with the cloth and lifted it from the counter. The high density of the thick and heavy feeling reached me, and the weight seemed to be similar to the Blue Rose sword.

The sackcloth was merely draped over it slightly, so the top part fell off once it was lifted straight up, revealing the hilt.

The pommel was a simple spindle-shape, and there was a layer of thin carved leather wrapped around it firmly. The knuckle guard seemed a little small, perhaps because it was a branch. The sword hilt had the black transparent-like color from the Gigas Cedar, and the leather that was wrapped on it was a glossy black.

The sheath that covered the sword was also made of black leather. I reached my right hand out, let my fingers wrap around the grip slowly, and exerted strength in one go.

Up till now, I had wielded countless swords, but most of them were equipment in VRMMO worlds. The only exception was the old bamboo sword at home. But even so— or rather, because of this, I would feel some sort of feeling whenever I gripped a sword hilt. An icy-like feeling went through the palm of my right hand, through the wrist, the arm, the shoulder, and the back.

On the first level of Aincrad, when I held the «Anneal Blade» I earned from the first mission.

On the ninth level, when I held the «Queen's Knightsword» the dark elf queen gifted me with.

On the 50th level, when I held the black longsword «Elucidator» the boss dropped.

When I held the white longsword «Dark Repulser» the blacksmith Lizbeth forged for me.

And in the elf world ALFheim, when I wielded the legendary weapon «Excaliber» after much painstaking efforts—

A similar icy-like feeling, or perhaps one more intense, shot through my entire body, causing me to be unable to move for a moment. Then the aftershock of the trembling faded and I exerted strength into my abdomen, pulling out the sword from the black leather sheath.

Jiiinnn—!! A slightly heavier sword sound as compared to the Blue Rose Sword echoed throughout the shop. It was heavy, but there was no hard metallic feeling. Of course, it was different from a wooden sword. It was a sound that showed an undefined amount of hardness, and also one that showed much more sturdiness. I turn my wrist and pointed the sword at the sky, *riiiin*, and the sword blade let out a slight cry.

"Mu..."

The craftsman Satore muttered,

"Wa...!"

Eugeo let out a slight voice.

And I held my breath, engrossed by the sword in my right hand.

The blade's length can be said to be exactly the same as my old beloved sword «Elucidator», but I was the one who cut down this branch from the Gigas Cedar in the first place, and I was the one who specified the length, so that was to be expected.

The blade was also covered by a pitch black color similar to the hilt. However, there was also a little transparent feeling as the sunlight shone on it through the windows from an angle, letting out a light golden color. The shape was that of a traditional one-handed straight sword, but slightly wider than the Blue Rose Sword.

The sword edge appeared in a terrifying manner, and it seemed that my skin will be cut if I touched even the smoothest part slightly with my hand.

"...Can you swing it?" Satore said in a deep voice.

I didn't answer, but looked around the shop to see that no other customers were around. The young apprentice didn't look like he was moving out from the workshop.

I moved my body and assumed a pose parallel with the long counter. There was a space more than 5m long in front of me, and that would be enough for me to test the sword. I grab onto the sword sheath with my left hand, opened my legs wide and bent down. I got into a basic one-handed vertical slash posture as I had no intention of using a sword skill.

There was a round shield that was made from a round steel board directly opposite me. I used this thing that was approximately 5m away from me as an imaginary target and swung the sword.

During this year, I had been using only the wooden sword for practice with my right hand, and the black sword let out a very heavy feeling. However, it wasn't an unpleasant feeling. The sword seemed to be motivating me or pleading me to use it well, a comfortable heavy feeling.

As the sword was pointed towards the top, I took a step forward. I used the momentum generated by the vector shift instead of the power of my wrist and gathered my imagination. With all the energy that was gathered in the sword tip— I took a sharp step forward and unleashed my momentum.

"Sh...!"

The black light went racing down in a straight line. After a short moment, *swoosh*, a ripping sound could be heard in the air. The sword tip stopped just a hair-breadth away from the floor, but the power of the swing spread out in a fired manner as it rumbled the floor.

I slowly got up. Eugeo first started clapping, and Satore snorted violently.

"I see... so, a trainee from the Academy can swing that thing, huh?"

"This is a nice sword."

I felt that there was no need to say anything else as I answered. On hearing this, the craftsman finally showed a smile and held his beard as he spoke,

"Such redundant words. This thing took 6 Corengan whetstones... Either way, a promise is a promise. I won't be counting the chiseling fees. Once you become famous, just spread the word that your sword was made by the craftsman Satore. That thing is now yours."

"...I'm really grateful."

I took a deep bow, and Eugeo did the same. I lifted my head and sheathed the sword.

Satore spent two seconds staring at the black sword, but immediately chuckled.

"You can decide on the sword name. This sword will become the signature of my shop. Don't give it any funny name."

"Uu..."

I was slightly speechless because of these words. Most likely, it was because all my equipment had names beforehand, so I'm not really good with this naming thing.

"...I-I'll think about it carefully. Then, if its Life drops, I'll come over to ask you to maintain it..."

"Um. Let me say this first. Don't expect me to charge you for free next time."

"Of-Of course."

We exchanged such words, and I bowed deeply again for the final time before taking a few steps towards the exit with Eugeo.

At this moment, *GLANK!* A loud metallic sound could be heard from behind, causing me to jump up slightly in shock. I turned my head and saw Satore's widened eyes as he stared at the west wall.

I followed his stare, and what I saw was the buckler for sale sliced in half down the middle as its right half landed on the floor.

1. Deliberately destroying items that are sold in the shop is against the Taboo Index.

2. It's against the Taboo Index to not pay for an item if it was broken accidently.

3. If the owner excuses the person involved in 2, it would not be breaking the Taboo Index.

I remembered this new knowledge as I hurried back to the Academy. Beside me, Eugeo-sensei was whispering about what happened just now with a pale expression.

"...It was just sword testing. There's no need to use a secret move! Anyone can expect the sales item to be broken when you use such a move in the shop!"

"Y-Yeah— ...but I never intended to use the sword... no, a secret move or something..."

"Don't bluff. I saw it, Kirito. The moment you swung the sword down, it let out a little glow. Can it be anything else other than the Aincrad-style secret move I'm the only other person who know of?"

"Y-Yeah... but my impression was that the Aincrad-style never had such a move..."

We continued our conversation, and suddenly, a sweet aroma unwittingly entered my nostrils, dealing a blow to my head.

The streets of North Centoria were divided into areas. The southernmost area, area 1 (the one closest to the Axiom Church) was the Imperial city, area 2 was the Imperial Governmental Area, 3 and 4 were streets of noble houses. The high class noble mansions built in area 3 were so luxurious that even Asuna's mansion would pale in comparison, it was even more shocking to hear that the 1st class to 3rd class earls had wide parcels of land they called «Personal Estates» outside the streets of Centoria.

These personal estates had small villages in them, and the residents over there were treated like nobles' servants. Sometimes, children who grew up in such an environment would become uncouth young lords like Rainos and Wanbell.

And then, in the 5th area, there were facilities with the «Imperial» names, like the Knights headquarters and the arena. Of course, the Imperial Master Sword Academy was located here too.

Areas 6 and 7 were business districts, and in the northern areas 8, 9, 10, there were the streets the residents of Centoria live in.

Based on what I learned during geography, this structure was exactly the same as the other empires' capitals, East, West and South Centoria. No matter how I thought, it was definitely not a coincidence, but it would be impossible to imagine the 4 kings gathered together and chatting in a friendly manner. I supposed this would be a unification designed by the bigshots in the Church.

Either way—

If I wanted to move back from Satore's metalcrafts shop in area 7 to the Master Swords Academy in area 5, I would have to pass through area 6,

and area 6 was a business district filled with food markets and restaurants, a place full of temptation. It might not be too far of a stretch to say that all the silver and bronze coins that were in my wallet were all spent here whenever I had gone out this year.

What made it especially dangerous was that it was 2pm on our rest day this afternoon. There was a restaurant on the 3rd Eastern Street called the «Jumping Deer Inn», and when they would bake their trademark honey pies, the sweet aroma would spread throughout the streets, causing my will's Saving Throw to be thoroughly tested. I had never been able to pass this test successfully before.

"...Hey, Eugeo. It's great that we weren't charged for the compensation of the shield and this guy's grinding."

I continued to slow down as I said, and my partner nodded slightly as he answered,

"...Yeah. I only knew after we joined the Academy that Satore-san's a famous guy who has got the proof of a first-class craftsman. If we paid the proper price, it's likely that our total fortunes still would not be enough to pay for it."

"Heh... —then, it might be a little late... but what happens if there's not enough? Will we be arrested on the spot?"

"They won't go that far either way. At that moment, he'll record it on tab, and you have to come pay it on interest every month."

"I-I see..."

Unlike Aincrad, which used the self-restriction «Cardinal» system to control the col trading sytem, this world seemed to more or less have some civilian economic activity. Then, as a poor student, shouldn't I be working hard for this prosperity?

I kept this noble motive within me as I proposed something to Eugeo,

"...Since we settled our money issues, how about 3?"

My partner then sighed in a I knew this was going to happen manner,

"Two at most."

He answered. I grinned as I nodded my head, and turned my feet to the left front side before running to the shop attendant onee-san that was serving the freshly baked honey pies at the take-out corner.

Unknowingly, my body got completely used to the black sword, held on my back with a leather strap, since I seemingly couldn't feel that weight anymore. It felt like it had been there for several years.

Part 4

The harmony of the honey and the butter danced around in a molten state, performing a symphony. When we reached the Academy, I split off from Eugeo, who intended to head off to Golgosso-sempai's room, and went off to the Novice trainee dorm's Duty Office. This was to attain permission from the dorm manager, Miss Azurika to keep this sword as my personal belonging.

In the real world, if I brought a bladed object that's more than 1m long, I would probably be scolded by the teacher, or the police might even be called in to arrest me. However, this Academy, in this otherworld, was an organization that groomed swordsmen. As long as I had only one real sword, I would be allowed to bring it in.

As for why I could only bring in one, that was because in this world, all the weapons, including swords, would absorb Sacred Power little by little— the space resources. To put it specifically, weapons that had their Life worn out slightly in a battle would regain their Life slowly if they were kept properly and sheathed... So the sword was basically absorbing the Sacred Power in it's surroundings. Of course, if it became so blunt that it couldn't recover on its own I would have to find a sharpening master, and a blacksmith if it broke or had a break or something.

If there were no restrictions on allowing students to bring their own swords, a student with a weapon mania may end up bringing hundreds of weapons, and after that, his room would have an abnormal amount of Sacred Power being supplied. It seemed this was the reason why only one sword per person was allowed to be brought in.

As it was a rest day today, even Miss Azurika wasn't at the reception counter, but sitting at the duty office with its door opened, sorting through the documents. After hearing my quick knocking, she lifted her head and blinked her greyish-blue eyes.

"Is there something wrong, Novice trainee Kirito?"

"Excuse me... I'm here today to ask for a permit to have a sword as my personal belonging."

I bowed slightly, walked in from the door, and quickly looked around the room. There were many leather sealed folders on the bookshelf beside the wall, but there was only a table and a chair. In other words, this woman herself was the one who took care of running this dorm that housed 120 students.

After hearing my words, Miss Azurika tilted her head slightly, but immediately got up, and took out a folder from the documents on the bookshelf without hesitation. She then took out one of the common documents kept within and put it right in front of me.

"Write down all the necessary particulars on it."

"Yes, understood."

I tentatively lowered my head and looked over. On the form, there were the simple items like name, student ID and sword priority. As I thought about how I didn't need a guardian's signature this time, I filled in my name in katakana 'Kirito', the student number '7' —and suddenly, I stopped the pen tip. I recalled things carefully, and though I tried swinging this sword before, I never opened the «window» to check.

With Miss Azurika staring at me, I hurriedly undid the sackcloth on my bag and removed the leather strap that was buttoned. I opened up the clothed side, intending to open the window by revealing the hilt, and at that moment,

"...!"

I lifted my head after hearing that sharp gasp. What entered my eyes was a rare sight of Miss Azurika widening her eyes when she would normally maintain a calm expression.

"Is-Is... there anything the matter?"

Miss Azurika blinked a few times after hearing my voice, and then shook her head, "No, it's nothing.". It seemed that she didn't have anything else to say about this, so I turned my gaze back to the sword, and used two fingers of my right hand to enter the motion command. I tapped the

pommel of the sword lightly, and the property window appeared with a ringing-like sound effect.

The priority that was shown was—«Class 46».

To think that it was higher than the Divine Tool Blue Rose Sword by 1. No wonder it was so heavy. Once I entered the number in the third column, I wrapped the sword back as how it was, and handed over the completed form.

...Is there a problem. Don't tell me there's a limit on priority? I thought impatiently in my mind.

"Novice Trainee Kirito."

"Ye-Yes."

"You have... the memory of that sword..."

She spoke till here, but suddenly stopped. Miss Azurika closed her eyes, and when she lifted her eyelids again, those eyes reverted back to the usual stern dorm supervisor eyes.

"...No, it's nothing. I've received your application. I suppose there's no need for me to emphasize this, but remember, a real sword can only be used for personal training. It can't be used in practical exams and group practices, understood?"

"Yes!"

I energetically answered and put on the clothed black sword on my back, as I wondered about whether I should ask about what Miss Azurika said. But as I could expect, I couldn't get an answer from her. Thus, I just made a knight salute and left the duty office.

I walked down the front corridor, and thought in a perplexed manner,

Sword's... memory?

These were inexplicable words. It's true that in this world, all the items, including the swords were recorded with the help of the Mnemonic Visuals. But that was a technology developed by the venture enterprise «RATH» in the real world, so the residents of Underworld logically wouldn't be able to realize this.

In other words, the 'sword's memory' Miss Azurika talked about should be as what she said. This black sword had some form of memory. But exactly what kind of memory was that? What did she see in this black sword...?

I searched for an answer to this doubt as I walked out of the dorm, and heard the melody of 3pm bell that rang from the bell tower which was extended out from the roof. It was a lot deeper than the bell I would hear in Rulid Church, but the melody itself was exactly the same.

The agreed time with Rina-sempai was 5pm.

I couldn't feel a single bit of unnaturalness when I tested it at Satore's metalworks... I would say that the feeling was rather relieving, as if my beloved sword was revived from the time I was in SAO. However, it would be better for me to test out whether I could use it with the Aincrad secret moves, or sword skills.

This rest day occurred once every week, and practically all the students born in Centoria had went home, quite a few students born in other places would head out to sightsee, and so the wide Academy grounds were rather empty. Also, there's a forest and a river in the campus grounds, so there were quite a few places for me to practice my moves— even though I said so, I still wanted to eliminate the possibility of other people seeing me. That's because I wanted to practice the «Consecutive Hit Skills» that none of the sects in this world had.

Why did sword skills exist in Underworld?

Why didn't consecutive hit skills exist?

I had been in this world for almost two years, but even till now, I had seen no sign of finding an answer. The only thing I could imagine was that when the RATH technician who was constructing Underworld may have used the «The Seed» package in some sort of way... But even if it was a fact, it still couldn't explain everything.

As for why, that's because «The Seed» that was freely circulated— the simplified version of the «Cardinal» system didn't have sword skills in them. Right now, in 2026, amongst the many VRMMOs around, only ALO, the completely duplicated copy of the old SAO server, had sword skills. It definitely couldn't be the venture enterprise «Ymir», the operator of ALO, assisting RATH here.

After that, I could only think of a countless amount of endless baseless guesses. If I wanted to know the truth, I would have to meet the governor at the top of the Centoria Cathedral, and there's no other way.

Either way— the secret moves of the swordsmen in Underworld were all one-strike skills; like «Vertical» and «Avalanche».

As for the reason behind this problem, I had some form of deduction already. It's likely that this was the reason why Underworld didn't have any actual fighting. With the absolute law of the Taboo Index, with the invincible soldiers of the Integrity Knights protecting Underworld, all the battles would definitely become «matches». What was promoted was a splendorous, elegant victory. Wasn't this what the swordsmen in this world had been seeking these hundreds of years? To get into a mighty posture from a far distance away before using a single-strike skill to win?

Also, another reason may be to protect accidents from happening.

The fights in the local tournaments were all until one side was cornered, and even the Central and higher-level tournaments were such that the first strike would determine the winner. Naturally, consecutive hit skills that wouldn't stop midway through would naturally be avoided.

In this situation, physique and arm strength would have an advantage, as they would have absolute confidence in the power of their one hits... So it's expected that people like the elite swordsman head, Uolo Levanteinn being able to become strong as a mighty sword user would be strong. If I weren't allowed to use consecutive skill hits during the SAO era, I would definitely be unable to beat a dual-wielding player of the same level.

This was definitely the same reason why Sortiliena-sempai kept losing to Chairman Uolo during these two years.

Even when I perform my consecutive skill hits to Rina-sempai, it will be impossible for her to learn it. Even Eugeo, who had no experience with any existing style, took several months learning the 2 consecutive hit skill «Vertical Arc».

However, if I could show that a sword skills wasn't just about a magnificent slash from overhead, if I could shake off this doubt in sempai's heart about how the Aincrad-style and the similar Serlut-style were different from the higher Norlangarth style, she should be able to have a chance of winning at the graduation duel.

I continued to think about this as I walked east, and unknowingly, I reached the east side of the campus.

The school campus that was surrounded by the fan-shaped walls had the central school campus, a large practice arena, libraries, trainee and instructor dorms, the elite swordsmen dorm and many more buildings within, and yet still had so much space. The walls on the north and south sides had large gates, there was a slightly tall hill on the west side, and a rather large forest on the east side. No matter where it was, I couldn't see any students around.

Even so, I chose the forest with much more cover just in case. I found an empty clearing in the forest and stopped. The short and thin grass grew thickly like grass on a football field, so there shouldn't be any place where I would be tripped. I looked around, checked that there were only 2-3 butterflies other than me around, and reached my right hand to the back.

I searched around, undid the sackcloth, and grabbed onto the sword hilt that was revealed. After feeling the leather grip that felt like it would stick onto my hand, I immediately drew the sword out.

The pitch black longsword that was lit by the sunlight shining through the twigs and leaves was originally made from a branch of the Gigas Cedar, so to put it technically, it should be a «Wooden Sword». But the blade reflected a hard light nobody could imagine. The famed craftsman Satore spent a year grinding this blade out, and on first glance, one could see the terrifying amount of priority... But I couldn't see anything like a «memory» from this thing that couldn't talk.

I pushed aside these doubts and got into a basic posture. This time, my mind was strongly imagining, unlike the time when I was testing the sword in the crafting shop. I imagined the one-strike diagonal sword skill I had used countless times— the «Slant».

After an instant moment of gathering, the blade let out a bright water-color glow. I used my back foot and right hand to accelerate my sword skill as my body was moved by an invisible hand.

Shoobash! A sharp sound could be heard, and the trajectory of the slash was drawn out in the air. The slanted line disappeared like the flames of the sun as the sword wind drew a straight line, blowing aside the grass on the ground.

I kept my body in a downswing position and stared at the tree twig that was about 5m in front of me. However, there was no signs of the tree twig breaking even after the effects of the skill disappeared.

This was to be expected. The basic «Slant» range was 2.5m at most. The power would not be able to reach a place twice the distance away.

But, even if that were so... the round shield that was about the same 5m away in the craftsman shop shouldn't be sliced. It couldn't possibly be that time, the buckler just happened to have its Life worn out at that timing, and I definitely didn't carry out any sword skills. Eugeo said that 'the sword glowed'... But I had no idea why that happened. I really didn't know anything. I still knew far too little about this world.

I sighed and stood up straight. I adjusted my breathing and got into position for the next skill.

I sliced down from right above, and right when the sword was about to touch the ground, I pulled the sword tip back up as if it was bounced up and swung it back up again. 2 consecutive hit skill «Vertical Arc». A sword wind that was more ferocious than before was whipped up as it swayed the grassy ground violently.

Up till now, I had been practicing sword skills I could use with the wooden sword. I changed the posture of my legs, put the sword at my waist, and twisted my body to the right.

"...!"

I exerted strength wordlessly and unleashed a left horizontal slash. The slash seemed to hit some invisible thing in front of me as its horizontal movement suddenly stopped and turned to the upper right corner. I took another step forward and unleashed a forward short-ranged high-powered slash. This was the 3 consecutive hit skill «Savage Fulcrum».

I wordlessly watched the crimson red trail that looked like the Arabic number 4[5] dissipate in the air. I nodded and continued to prepare the next sword skill. I raised the sword back up directly above me and did an overhead backswing.

I did a high-level slash, a low-level slash, a forward slash chained in, and then I brought the sword behind my back before letting out a ferocious slash. The blue square drawn in the air continued to spin as it moved

forward. The range was large, and there was only a small opening. This was the beloved sword skill of mine in the old SAO, «Vertical Square».

I managed to execute all four kinds of sword skills successfully without exception.

In that case, this meant that this black sword had the same level of priority as the Divine Tool «Blue Rose Sword» Eugeo had. However, I already guessed so when I opened the «window» in the dorm duty office and saw the class 46 number.

It seemed that I would be able to fulfill my promise of showing my high level sword skills to Rina-sempai. Before I heaved a sigh of relief, there was another feeling rumbling in my mind.

Whenever I used the Blue Rose Sword, I would only be able to use up to sword skills of 4 consecutive hits. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't carry out major skills of 5 consecutive hits or more. Then, what about this black sword? Since I would have to do it sooner or later, and since there's no one around, wouldn't this be a good chance?

I gripped onto the sword tightly, took a large step forward with my right foot, and gathered imagination filled with strength towards the sword that seemed to be hanging from my left shoulder, ready to unleash.

Unknowingly, I felt a small sharp pain from the base of my bangs, seemingly warning me, but I removed this unnecessary thought and focused on forming my sword skill.

Chka, *chka*, I saw the blade letting out an orange spark from the corner of my eyes.

It was a faint glow that was different from the bright effects I saw up till now. I tried my best to imagine the sword skill and maintained the action to get ready, but the sparks continued to fly and had no signs of calming down.

I continued to persist until this unstable posture couldn't be maintained any longer, and immediately started my movement in one go.

"Uooh...!"

I unknowingly let out a deep growl, and the right foot that stepped down rumbled the ground. The sword that swung from the top left side to the bottom right side let out a sharp slash in a sharp angle with the assistance

of the system— that should be the case. However, the sword didn't stop as it hit the ground.

The powerful recoil rushed up my right hand. If I wanted to force myself to drag the sword back, I would definitely take damage at this point, this was the judgment I made instantly. I gritted my teeth and pulled the sword that was stuck in the ground 20cm deep, seemingly flailing as I fell back.

ZPANG! The blunt impact sound rang behind me. I turned around as my back landed on the grassy ground.

—So I failed? What wasn't enough? My level? The sword priority? Or both...?

What entered the eyes of my body that was spread out wide and lying on the ground—

The large amount of dirt and grass that was sent flying by the slash.

And the sight of a man who was standing at a silent corner of this empty space on the other side.

What covered the tall and lanky body was really the school uniform, but the color wasn't of the basic grey color. There was a bright cobalt blue line on the seemingly pearl white based uniform. It's the privilege of one of the 12 elite swordsmen trainee to be able to modify their uniform colors at will.

Rina-sempai had purple with a greyish tinge. Golgosso-sempai had a thick green color. And as for pearl white color with blue... that would be the color of the swordsmen head Uolo Levanteinn—

The light blond hair was kept short, and undoubtedly, the one who was staring at me with his emotionless steel blue eyes was the strongest man in this Academy.

As I laid down on the ground, I continued to stare at a black radial-shaped stain of dirt on the spotless white uniform, one my sword shot out.

To be honest, it's not like I had never thought about running away.

If this were Aincrad, and if the opponent was a big shot from the Divine Dragon Alliance Guild, I probably would have fled away without hesitation. But in this world, running away would be the worst option if I messed up

something. There would be an added penalty to my crime, and in the end, it would be the terrifying «breaking the Taboo Index».

Thus, I could only remain still for a second, and then knelt down immediately as I put the sword in my right hand onto the ground —to show the highest order of respect— lowered my head and yelled,

"I'M REALLY SORRY, LORD TRAINEE LEVANTEINN!! PLEASE FORGIVE MY SIN OF DISRESPECT!"

The only other time I probably begged for forgiveness so desperately was likely on the 61st level of Aincrad when Asuna beat me up in her room. I continued to think about such useless things as I kept kneeling.

"If I'm correct, it seems like you're the valet for trainee Serlut."

I heard such a deep voice.

I tentatively lifted my head, and saw the steel blue eyes immediately before nodding my head to admit.

"Yes, I'm Novice trainee Kirito."

"Is that so."

The trainee swordsman glanced at the black sword on the grassy ground, and then continued with a meaningful high pitched male voice,

"According to the academy rules' tossing dirt on an upperclassman's clothing would completely warrant a punishment authority of insolence..."

On hearing this, I couldn't help but groan in my heart.

This «punishment right» was a right the model students of the school students, the elite swordsmen trainees had. They could punish students who infringed the academy rules lightly due to accident based on their own discretion. I had been given countless swing practices because I had been late getting to Rina-sempai's room.

Then, what would they do with those who broke the academy rules severely— In this world, such a thing wouldn't happen. Of course, infringing on the rules severely naturally wouldn't be something that could be triggered by accident, and Artificial Fluctlights themselves couldn't break this rule on their own will. The only one at risk here would be me, a

natural Fluctlight, but fortunately, I hadn't done anything too eyecatching and managed to last through a year safely. —However.

To actually dirty Chairman Uolo's uniform with a large pile of dirt... that would be a critical crime here...

"—However, I don't hate you for hiding from others and practicing on a rest day, even though you didn't care that «practicing on a rest day» itself is against the rules."

Gehhh—I again let out a wordless cry.

In that case— this seemed to be the case. However, if I agreed about it now, it may end up raising the possibility of the punishment authority being used. I didn't know whether it was useless or not, but I had to struggle.

"This-This isn't what you think it is, Lord Chairman. This isn't practice... Eh, erm, yeah, I'm just testing the new sword. The repairs of the good I requested a shop in the 7th area to do was complete, and I couldn't wait till tomorrow..."

At this moment, I finally realized something major.

This blond flat-haired guy... When did he first see me? No, before that, why was he here?

I deliberately came all the way into this forest to practice the «consecutive-hit skills» the sword skills Underworld didn't have. The reason I did this was to show off the consecutive hit skills to Rina-sempai to help her beat the head. However, the chairman saw this before I could even show it to sempai. Wouldn't this be a complete reversal of what I wanted to do?

—It seemed the strongest man in the Academy realized my thinking as he gave a slight wry smile.

"...You say you're here to test your sword, but your shout's rather forceful. Speaking of which, I only saw you use that sword to slash into the ground and fall back. I'll just treat it as... being unable to stand firmly while being led by a sword you're not used to, that's all. I'll give that you didn't break the rules of training on a rest day, since I came here for a similar reason."

As I felt relieved on hearing this, I tilted my head in a perplexed manner,

"A similar... reason?"

"Let's just say that you're not the only one who tried to swing swords on a rest day for this kind of reason."

The nicely-shaped lips showed a confident smile as Uolo turned his stare towards the empty ground I'm practicing on.

"But I found this place first. I agreed too that I would leave this place for my valet once I graduate. So you have to find somewhere else."

—I see. No wonder. I thought. The man standing in front of me just found a reason that this wasn't training, but something else, and came to practice on a rest day... This empty space was used to practice, and I just happened to arrive at this place at the same time, that's all. The reason why the grassy land is so neat was because the Life was reset every week when Uolo stepped on it.

I'll find a place with more weeds then. I made such a decision in my mind and lowered my head again.

"...Understood, I will do so. Thank you for your magnanimous..."

"It's too early for you to thank me, trainee Kirito."

"You-You're saying?"

"I did say that I won't be pursuing matters about you training on a rest day, but I never said that I'll forgive you about this."

I slowly lifted my head, and saw that the trainee swordsman lifted a right finger with a serious expression on his face while pointing at the chest of his uniform. He was pointing at the black stain on the pearl white cloth.

"Bu-But, chairman, didn't you say that you 'don't hate' me for that..."

"Ahh, I did say so. That's why I won't give any punishment like cleaning the entire swordsmen dorm or copy 1000 lines of spells."

Phew. I was relieved for only that moment however.

The flat-haired strongest swordsman continued to use his fingertip to brush off the dirt on his uniform and he said something unbelievable.

"Novice trainee Kirito, your punishment will be to spar against me once. Not with a wooden sword, but with that sword you're using. I'll use this too."

At this moment, I finally found that the sword dangling on the left waist of the swordsman trainee had a sword hilt of pure gold and a deep blue sheath. Anyone could tell that it was a real sword with very high priority.

"...Spa-Spar...? As-As in?"

"The term sparring would only mean 'to practice in a match format', nothing else. However, this place has too little space. The large practice arena should be empty on a rest day, so let's move over there."

After saying such a fluent flow of words, the head swordsman simply turned around.

For two seconds, I stared blankly at the white back that seemed to glide off under the trees. Once my thoughts finally grasped the current situation, I seriously wondered whether I should run away, but «not fulfilling my punishment» would be a serious infringement of the rules this time. I couldn't possibly let myself be expelled here if I wanted to became an elite swordsman trainee during the promotional exam at the end of this month like Uolo.

I lifted up the black sword lying in front of me and cleanly sheathed it behind me before standing up. Unwilling to give up, I continued to glance twice at the stone wall of the Academy that exposed itself through the trees, made my decision in a reluctant manner, and chased after the blond flat-haired guy.

There were all sorts of weeds and grass dangling around the feet from the empty land a step away, but Uolo never showed any signs of staggering.

...Won't it be easy for this guy to dodge or knock down a mere pile of dirt?

At this moment, I realized this issue, but everything was too late.

Part 5

I walked out of the forest, met up with Uolo on the stone path, and the 4pm bell rang.

Unknowingly, the sky was dyed a little with the color of the night, and the campus started to show signs of students coming back from the streets. They all widened their eyes once they saw the figure in white and blue uniform walking in front of me.

This was to be expected. Ever since Uolo Levanteinn became an elite swordsman trainee, he practically never appeared in places other than the dorm. He was such a character who appeared so rarely that other than his valet, the students would only see him at the tests that occur 4 times every year. Even I, a valet of Rina-sempai, would only see him a few times in the corridor even after going in and out of the swordsmen dorm every day. If I have to say it, this was the first time I officially met him.

And right behind this legendary existence was a novice trainee swordsman of common birth... and the location was the large practice arena, so it would definitely be an eye-catcher. However, the most terrifying thing at this point would be that quite a few students discovered this and started hurrying over from the school campus and the trainee dorms. At this point, the entire academy was going 'Something's going on at the practice arena!', and news of it had definitely spread around.

The curfew of a rest day would be 7pm, which would be slightly later, so more than half the students would still be outside at this time. But even so, there was a large group of students buzzing and coming over to observe, no, watch this show. In this case, I just needed to hurry up, settle this, and hide in Rina-sempai's room until the commotion ended...

No, wait. How am I going to settle this commotion...

As Uolo said, «sparring» in this academy would basically be an incomplete duel that's more than practice. The principle would be that we would fight until one side's cornered, but if both sides agreed, the rule of «first strike wins» like the old SAO era was recognized. In other words, once someone took a blow from the opponent first, the battle would be over.

In this case, the loser would definitely take some level of damage. This was the one exception to the rule of «Deliberately reducing other people's Lives» the Taboo Index forbade for so many countless times. The 'first strike win' duel that even the Zakkaria guards forbade was permitted at this Academy, and the reason for that was that the medical office had gathered all sorts of high-priced medicine and teachers who could carry out high-level Sacred Arts. In other words, even if we got heavily injured in the sparring, it would be fine if it could be treated.

Even though I say that, chairman Uolo said that he would be using a real sword in this sparring, so the rules would be that we would fight until one side's cornered. If I wanted to win, I just need to dodge or parry off the

powerful overhead strike, and make sure my sword stops before I hit when I counter.

Of course, I could tell that this would be dauntingly hard. No, before that, should I really be winning?

Uolo was the biggest objective Rina-sempai had been aiming to beat. Would it be right for me, a valet who had been undergoing sempai's training, to beat this opponent? Would Rina-sempai really be happy even if I win...

As I started to lower my head and form these thoughts, two sets of rushed footsteps unknowingly entered my ears.

I suddenly recovered, lifted my head and looked towards the left. What entered my eyes was the scene of Elite Swordsman Trainee Sortiliena Serlut with her long skirt fluttering as she dashed over and my partner Eugeo running behind her. Both of them didn't run through the path, but went directly through the hills that covered the grasslands.

Leaving aside Eugeo, I had never seen Rina-sempai pant while running up till now. Uolo, who was walking in front of me, suddenly stopped and turned to the left.

Rina-sempai took only a few seconds to get onto the path, gave me a worried expression, and faced off against Uolo. She tidied her greyish-purple skirt impeccably, straightened her back, and said,

"...Levanteinn-dono, what's the meaning of this?"

In this Academy, Rina-sempai was the only student who did not use polite words to Uolo. The students surrounding from afar let out a soft commotion.

The top swordsman took the piercing stare of those deep blue eyes without flinching. The short blond head tilted slightly as he calmly answered,

"As you can see, Serlut-dono, your valet did something improper. I considered that it was somewhat inappropriate to punish him severely on a rest day... So I intended to spar against him."

The buzz surrounding us got louder.

Rina-sempai finally noticed a black stain on the torso of Uolo's uniform. It seemed that she was able to deduce what was going on as she gently bit her lips.

While the top and second ranked elite swordsmen trainees were facing each other, I nudged my way towards my partner standing blankly near the human wall. His face was showing the expression I was ever-familiar with— the blend of 'What did you do this time' and 'Don't tell me... You've done it again...?' expressions.

"...You got here rather fast."

I whispered. Eugeo nodded slightly a few times.

"I was in the cafeteria of the swordsmen dorm, and Zobun-sempai's valet came running in saying that the chairman's going to fight against you. I was thinking 'How was that possible?', but came running over with Serlut-sempai... But, it seems that it's not impossible at all."

"Ahh, well... That seems to be the case."

I nodded. Eugeo seemed like he wanted to say something as he took a deep breath, but after pausing for a few seconds, he merely let out a huge sigh.

"...No, it's a miracle that you didn't manage to cause any problems up till now, Kirito. Please, show off all the troubles you have accumulated for this one year today."

"As expected of you who've been with me for such a long time, partner."

I inadvertently giggled. Eugeo patted me on my back, causing me to look away.

Rina-sempai was still staring at Chairman Uolo with a stern expression, but even I, who hardly memorized the rules, knew that breaking this deadlock was impossible.

I left Eugeo and moved to sempai's side, nodded gently to my beloved mentor.

"I'm really sorry to make you worry, sempai. But I'm fine... Or rather, I feel that facing off against the chairman is sorta lucky."

I whispered as I stared at sempai's dark blue eyes, trying to read the emotions in them. I wanted to know what she felt about her own valet facing her biggest opponent.

However— I immediately felt regret over my actions. All I could see deep within sempai's eyes was worry.

"Kirito... How are you going to win in this spar?"

This question was too sudden, so I blinked as I answered,

"Eh...? We're using real swords, so I guess we'll fight until we're cornered..."

"Oh yes, I forgot to explain."

Uolo interrupted as he explained with the usual calm expression,

"I won't do sparring when we fight until one side is cornered as that will only dull my sword strikes. The exams the Academy specified was something out of my hands, but personally, I have been using the rule of first strike win in my fights."

"Eh...? Then, in other words..."

The head swordsman trainee showed a slight change of expression in front of the shocked me. It seemed that he was baring... or rather, revealing his fangs like a carnivore.

"But speaking of which, we can only fight in a first strike match under both parties' agreement. This was decided by the Taboo Index, so it takes priority over the swordsman trainee punishment... I'll let you choose then, trainee Kirito."

The crowd that had been buzzing quietly immediately hushed up.

Of course you have to fight until one side's cornered! I seemed to hear Eugeo's voice, and I didn't need to hear Rina-sempai speak up to know that it was reckless to carry out a first strike match with real swords instead of wooden swords, against the strongest man in the Academy.

That's what I felt, but—

"I'll let you decide then, Levanteinn-dono. I'm the one being punished."

However, such words seemed to come out from my mouth automatically.

Eugeo's dejected sigh could be heard from behind me. Rina-sempai clenched her fists tightly as she held back from sighing sharply. And also, someone seemed to be sighing away on my hair, 'yare yare'— that's what I felt.

The name 'Master Swords Academy Large Practice Field' may sound impressive, but in fact, it was just a large sports hall. The white floor was polished brightly, and there were four black squared sparring arenas. The spectator stands were built all around, and it had the capacity of 260— enough to contain every student and teacher during the biggest events of the academy, the swordsmanship examinations.

I stood on the east arena Uolo chose, looked around, and saw that there were already more than 50 students around. Since it would be just before the curfew time of the rest day today, it seemed that all the students who stayed in the Academy were all back here. There were around three instructors, and what was shocking was that even the novice trainee dorm supervisor Miss Azurika was there.

Also, what was most shocking was that present amongst the students, were those two annoying upper-class nobles... Rainos and Wanbelll. Perhaps they came back from their own mansions earlier than usual. They were sitting at the front most seats, giving heinous smirks as they looked over. It looked like their faces were saying that they wanted to see me get sliced down by Uolo.

When Uolo let me choose, I said so boldly to him that 'He can decide the rules', and I didn't regret it at this point... Or rather, in that situation, I personally had no other choice.

But on the other hand, there was another doubt lingering in my mind.

Should I be sparring against Uolo?

I want to challenge the swordsman who's called the strongest in this academy. I couldn't shake off this lingering thought in my mind. Basically, the third objective when I originally came all the way from Rulid Village that's far north to Central Centoria here was to fulfill the antique gaming goal, the desire to 'fight against strong opponents'.

But at this point, in my heart, there was a wish that was much stronger than fighting against Uolo.

I wanted to let Rina-sempai win against this guy in the final battle. To let her beat this guy and release her from these binds. During this year I had been serving her, I never saw a sincere smile from her before.

As my heart was harassed by these lingering thoughts, I continued to stare at Uolo, who was standing on the other side of the arena, inspecting the sharp blade of his beloved sword—

"Kirito."

Rina-sempai's voice came from behind me, causing me to turn around like I was ejected.

The second ranked swordsman stared right at me with her navy blue eyes, and whispered to me with an unwavering voice,

"I believe in your strength, Kirito. I trust you, so I'm going to tell you this. The Levanteinn family that teaches the Empire's knights has a secret family teaching called 'The sword drinks the blood of the strong. The power will become mine'."

"...Blood, is it?"

Sempai nodded back at the whispering me.

"Yeah. Uolo probably went through quite a few first strike matches in his private land before he entered the Academy. That experience probably created that terrifying strong sword of his. And right now, he... wants to turn the power of your sword into fresh blood and absorb it as food."

These were words that were hard to understand immediately, but I changed it to the knowledge I was familiar with in my mind, and immediately answered "I see" as I nodded.

It was all because of the «Imagine Power». Just like how the swordsmen of the Serlut family were restrained by the thought that 'The Serlut-style was an inferior style because they were forbidden from passing down the traditional sword style', the generations of the Levanteinn family had the imagination of 'The more the sword's dyed with the blood of powerful foes, the stronger they become', and this gave Uolo the power in his sword.

Most likely, that guy saw the slices of my consecutive hits in the open space of the forest and the black sword with high priority and deemed that I was an opponent worthy of letting his sword be dyed by my blood. It

sounded honorable, but in fact, it was no different from being a 'high quality prey'.

In other words, if I took an actual hit in this spar and bled, Uolo's imagination would get stronger, and to be honest, the possibility of that happening was rather high.

I couldn't allow myself to help the enemy before Rina-sempai's last battle. At this point, I had to take back my initial words and change the rules such that one side had to be cornered... as I was thinking about this.

Sempai pats her hands on my shoulders that drooped unwittingly and said,

"But I'll say this again. I believe you. I believe that you're not a swordsman who will take that guy's move that easily... You haven't forgot about what you promised me today, right?"

"What I promised...?"

I repeated it, and nodded my head hard,

"Yeah. I promised you that I will show you everything I have, sempai."

"Alright. The conditions may be slightly different now, but just show it to me here, Kirito. Release all the power and skills you have and beat Uolo Levanteinn."

The moment I heard those words, I felt all my doubts dissipate within me.

My hesitation over abandoning sempai and fighting Uolo and my fear of making the enemy stronger after my defeat were all just the worst excuses a defeated dog would think. I nearly gave that ruckus to my respected sempai as a present. Once I grab onto the sword, I just needed to focus all my soul into it and clash with all I got. I probably came all the way here by using that as my number 1 philosophy.

I gave a smile at sempai, nodded, and turned my head to the right. I exchanged looks with Eugeo, who was seemingly probing his body over from the handrail of the spectator stands. I grinned at him, and he gave me the usual worried expression while raising a clenched right fist at me gently.

I answered with the exact same move, and turned to Rina-sempai again,

"I'll fulfill my promise."

I merely said these words, and sempai wordlessly nodded before taking a step. A steady voice then came from the other side of the arena, seemingly waiting for this moment,

"I suppose you're done, Trainee Kirito."

I slowly turned around, walked towards the edge of the black tiled arena, and answered "Yes". Uolo and I then did a simple knight salute by putting our right fist gently onto the left chest. As it was not an official sparring contest, there was no instructor acting as an umpire. However, I didn't have any doubt about the conditions of winning. The first one to be struck by the opponent's sword and bleed would be the loser.

I took a step forward and stepped into the arena. 2 steps, 3 steps, once I took 4 steps, I stood on the starting line indicated by the white tiles.

We drew our swords, my opponent drew from his left waist, and I from my back. I saw Uolo's sword that had a golden tea colored hilt and a refined forged steel-colored sword, and the surrounding students all let out a cry of amazement "Ohh". After seeing my sword, those words became mutterings of doubt. Nobody had ever seen a real sword with a black sword hilt and a blade.

"Oh my, oh my. To think that the folks from the countryside would have the custom of dying their swords with ink, Rainos-dono!"

Wanbell, who was sitting on the spectator stands, pretended to whisper as he said with a voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Don't say that, Wanbell. Valet-dono here has no time to polish his swords."

Rainos however continued with the usual sarcastic remark, causing the surrounding noble students to be amused.

However, the instant Uolo started swinging his sword, the surrounding atmosphere went quiet. Perhaps it was partly due to the respect they had for the head swordsman trainee, but I guessed that those guys felt a tremendous sense of pressure from that posture.

—Is the difference between a wooden sword and a real sword so great?

I muttered silently in my heart.

As Rina-sempai's valet, I had witnessed the critical move Uolo Levanteinn would execute during the three swordsmen exams that were held in the arena first hand— the Northlangarth style «Avalanche» move, quite a few times. However, the pressure I felt was completely different as my opponent was using a real sword instead of a wooden sword, and this opponent just had to be Uolo.

The flatheaded blond-haired Uolo, who was slightly skinnier than me, had the impression of a pilgrim. However, I finally understood at this point that this was a completely serious mistake. Right now, those steel-blue eyes had some form of hidden light in it, the light of a berserker swordsman who was only seeking to use the steel blade to rip the enemy's body.

In this gaming world, Uolo's sword would likely be classified as a «Bastard Sword». Uolo used both hands to raise the slightly long sword hilt and the steel blade. The blade seemed to be surrounded by the flare of the sun, and that wasn't an illusion. That was the sword priority and the 'power' caused by the owner's imagination strength causing the space to tremor.

Zun. A heavy rumbling was released, and the head swordsman trainee finished his large overhead posture.

Once he dragged the sword further back, the «Heavens and Mountains Break»... also called the two-handed single thrust strike «Avalanche», would be activated.

It seemed like a long time ago, yet felt like several days ago when I spent my time in that floating city Aincrad. I went through countless battles, including one-on-one battles. One of the two-handed sword users who had the biggest impression on me was from the guild of the «Knights of Blood»the guard of the vice guild leader Asuna, the guy called Kuradeel.

I, who was challenged to a duel by him, read his first strike «Avalanche» and used a similar single thrust attack «Sonic Leap» to aim at the side of his weapon and managed to achieve my aim of breaking his weapon with the skill Arms Blast.

This memory awoke within me again, causing me to instantly consider if I could use the same tactic at that moment. However, I quickly gave up on this idea. Let alone breaking Uolo's sword, I might end up breaking my own sword— while this would not be likely, my sword would undoubtedly be deflected, and I would be slashed at cleanly down the shoulder.

The original form of the «Heavens and Mountains Break» was the «Avalanche» alright, but the move Uolo used was completely different from Kuradeel's in terms of speed and weight. He had absolute faith in the strength of his own move, granting his sword power in the process. If I couldn't find an imagination strong enough to resist it... An imagination of breaking through the organs and body until the sword tip is poking out from the other side, I wouldn't be able to stand on the same starting line as him.

Now isn't the time to think of it as a personal spar anymore. I have to use consecutive hits.

So I thought as I made the first motion of the highest level skill I could use up till now— the four consecutive hit «Vertical Square». This would require a high level of control, but I should be able to use the first, second and third hits to negate the opponent's Avalanche and hit with the fourth to win.

I raised the sword in my right hand, letting it face Uolo, and showed a steady posture. When using a sword skill to take on another sword skill, timing would be the essence. I had to use my sword skill while timing the opponent's sword skill activation. In other words, I had to 'activate later, strike first'.

The black sword tip that moved slowly arched through the top of the circle it drew and started tilting slightly behind. At that moment,

"...HAA!!"

Uolo took action while letting out a bone-chilling roar.

The blade of the broadsword had a reddish-golden glow surrounding it. The two-handed overhead slash that crushed Rina-sempai's «Cyclone» three times dragged what looked like a blazing trail as it closed in.

At this moment, my body started to move. I used a powerful stamp to activate the «Vertical Square» with the minimum prep action, and my first strike accelerated as I let out a flying thrust while moving forward.

KIINN!! As the high-pitched metallic sound rang, a powerful impact rushed up my right hand. My first strike was instantly struck down effortlessly. The surrounding students and instructors all probably thought that my move was the Norlangarth Secret move «Lighting Strike», the single strike «Vertical». If that was really the case, the winner would have been decided then. However, the show began here.

Even if I clashed with the opponent's move, if my posture wasn't severely knocked in disarray, the sword skill that was activated would continue. The second strike of the Vertical Square was to swing right up from below. My sword skill hadn't ended.

"ZAA!!"

I let my entire body turn left, and I swung my sword up sharply. The sound of impact rang again. The blue glow that surrounded my sword was mixed with the orange glow on Uolo's sword, forming a dazzling white light that lit the slightly dark practice arena.

This time, my sword was deflected back again. However, the opponent's Avalanche was slowed down as well. I gritted my teeth and immediately let out the third strike, a vertical slash down.

GAGIINN!! A much heavier sound than before rang as both swords clashed.

As I expected, the third hit wasn't enough to knock back Uolo sword, but Uolo's move stopped.

If I could pressure him back now, the Avalanche would be stopped, but I would still have the final hit of my 4 strikes.

"U...ohhh!!!"

"Nu...nn!!"

Uolo and I let out growls at the same time, desperately trying to parry away each other's sword.

At this point, the attack power of the sword skill and the system assist or whatsoever was meaningless. This was all about imagination vs imagination, a battle of wills. The two clashing swords let out bright white light at their intersection, letting out a small bright spark. The floor of the arena endured the tremendous pressure from our duel as it let out a rattling cry.

If there was someone observing the main memory installation of the entire Underworld at this point, he would see that there was a bright white glow in a quantum medium. Our Fluctlights were giving out signals, desperately trying to overcome each other and win. My opponent had lost all the collectedness he had on his face as there was a deep frown on him as his

lips were curled. My face was most definitely having that same expression as well.

This situation remained for 2, 3, 4 seconds— at that moment.

I saw something unexpected.

On the sides and back of the head swordsman trainee Uolo Levanteinn, I could vaguely see more than 5 figures that had similar looks, but were obviously different from him.

What I could see was the transparent shadowy bodies wielding the sword in the same posture as Uolo, but my instincts were telling me that these swordsmen definitely were the heads of the Levanteinn family over the generations who inherited the family name of Imperial Knights instructors.

In other words, this was what the mere student Uolo was bearing despite being the head of the family... Or rather, what he was forced to bear, the real show. The real source of power hidden in Uolo's slash.

—I... can't lose here!![6]

I seemed to hear this roar. At the next moment, a force that was much heavier and overwhelming pressure than before struck my shoulders.

The broadsword that was surrounded by a wildfire-like orange glow pushed the black sword in my hands back, seemingly trying to crush it. I desperately tried to steady myself, but my feet were slowly pushed behind.

If I was pushed back by another 10... no, 5cm, my sword skill would be forcefully stopped. At that moment, my sword would be deflected back, and my body would be slashed into heavily.

380 years.

This line suddenly appeared in my mind.

This amount of time had passed ever since Underworld was born. Even if it was protected by the absolute law, even though this became a world that didn't have any real battles, the swordsmen born here kept passing down the sword skills they refined for generations during these hundreds of years of history. The outcome was already far beyond the concept of «VRMMO game attack skills».

Zuu. My right foot was pushed behind again, and the glow surrounding my black sword started to trembled as it flickered.

—However.

I definitely wasn't fighting just to earn experience or something.

For the sake of my good friend who I first met, who reached out his warm hand to me, Eugeo. For the sake of Rina-sempai, who gently yet sternly guided me and taught me countless things, and more so for the people in the real world waiting for me to come back, Asuna, Suguha, Klein, Liz, Sinon, Agil, Silica and so many people.

"I also... MUSTN'T LOSE HERE...!!!"

In what seemed to be a response to this roar that was not of a voice—

DOKUN! The sword in my right hand trembled.

Golden lights appeared in the middle of the blue glow that was vanishing. The lights continued to multiply, finally filling the inside of the sword. While this phenomenon happened, the surroundings suddenly got darker drastically, but I seemingly didn't realize this.

That was because something stranger was happening on the sword itself.

KIN, *KIN*. The sword gradually expanded. As it was covered by a strong light effect, only Uolo and I could see that it was only widened by several centimeters. However, that was obviously and definitely not an illusion.

The sword blade, and even the hilt got slightly longer. I reached my left hand, seemingly guided, and used both hands to grab onto the sword hilt that was covered in black leather.

If this were Aincrad, this would be an irregular equipment, and the sword skill would be forcefully ended. But at this point, the blue glow of the Vertical Square that was about to vanish gained back its glow once my left hand gripped onto it, merging with the golden lights inside the blade, and seemingly swirling in a vortex.

I saw the wild force the black sword in my hands were releasing, and for some reason, remembered it original state... I remembered the «Giant Cedar». The same Gigas Cedar that stood high up in the middle of the forest south of Rulid, I remembered how it absorbed a large amount of

resources from the earth and the sun, that pitch black giant tree that was never cut down for more than 300 years.

...The sword's... memories.

These words were revived in my ears again, and was immediately covered by my roar.

"O...OOOOOOOHHHH!!!"

I squeezed out what remained of my strength and will, and raised my right foot—forward.

ZUN. The moment my right foot landed on the floor, the intensity of the energy caused by the clash between the two swords crossed the limit and exploded.

That was caused by a high level combustible Sacred Art spell, blowing Uolo and me away while we're unable to resist. However, both of us refused to back down as we continued leaning forward and steady our feet. The soles that were hardened rubbed against the floor of the arena, and small whiffs of smoke rose. We dragged two lines of burnt marks as Uolo and I stopped right at the edges of the arena.

Both sides had their swords deflected greatly. Uolo's «Avalanche» ended as the orange light effect faded gradually.

However— My «Vertical Square» continued to activate even with my hands holding my sword.

"SEIAAAAHHH!!"

I let out my momentum, stamped backwards and let out the final hit by releasing an overhead slash. The sword drew a bright blue arc... right at Uolo's undefended chest—

Chuu. It gently grazed by, stopping just right in front of the broken tile on the floor. The Vertical Square was not a lunge attack. I tried my best to extend its range, but it wasn't enough to reach through the entire arena.

Uolo and I stared at each other from close range[7]... At that moment, a sharp voice rang.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!!"

I instinctively leapt back, pulled my distance and lowered my sword. Uolo did the same on the other side as he got out of battle mode.

Once I realized this, I looked over at the source of the voice in a skeptical manner, wondering who dared to decide this over the head swordsman trainee in this spar that didn't have any umpire. Then, I was speechlessly shocked when I saw Miss Azurika, the dorm supervisor of the novice trainees.

Why would she, a mere dorm supervisor instead of an instructor, do such an umpire-like decision? And why did Uolo actually listen to her obediently?

I stood blankly while these two heavy doubts surrounded me. At this moment, the head swordsman trainee who lowered his sword whispered to me from the left,

"That lady's decision has to be abided by."

"...Eh, well... Why is that?"

"Because that woman was the first swordsman representative of the Norlangarth Empire during the Four Empire Unity tournament 7 years ago."

EHH—!?

Uolo Levanteinn turned back to me, with my eyes nearly popping out, and nodded with a pilgrim-like expression instead of the sword berserker chilling expression from before.

"The punishment for you has ended, novice trainee Kirito. Be careful not to stain other people's clothing with dirt in the future."

After saying that, Uolo sheathed the sword back onto his left waist and turned away.

The white and blue uniform casually crossed through the entire arena, and at the moment he disappeared through the exit—

"UWAAHHH!!" A tremendous applause rained down on the entire large practice field. Shocked, I looked around, and saw that the almost 100 students and even the teachers on the spectator stands were applauding. At the frontmost row, standing right beside dorm supervisor Azurika, who was applauding away with the usual serious expression, was my teary partner— Eugeo, clapping away. I raised a left fist at him gently. Beside him was the large frame of his mentor, Golgosso-sempai who had appeared unknowingly.

Finally, I glanced at the sword in my right hand, checked whether it reverted back to its original size, and sheathed it back with a chiin sound—at that moment.

BOSSN!

My shoulders were slammed hard, causing me to jump up slightly. The white slender hands clumsily turned me around, and I saw Sortiliena-sempai giving a teary expression that was worse than Eugeo.

"...I thought you were about to be sliced down."

I heard this in a voice that probably only I could hear, and nodded.

"Yeah... I thought so too."

"...You knew and yet you wouldn't surrender..... You, big idiot."

Sempai closed her eyes, and her eyebrows twitched slightly. However, it seemed that she finally managed to stop her crying with a saving roll as she took a deep breath and opened her eyes wide. Her navy blue eyes had a gentle light I had never seen before.

"That was beautiful... Really an exciting match, Kirito. Allow me to thank you first. It's a pity I can't have it to myself... But, you showed me a fight with all you had as you promised... Thank you."

"Eh... But, the result was a draw..."

"Are you still unhappy that it was a draw, even if it was against that Levanteinn?"

"N-No, that's not it."

As she saw me shake my head like a wave, sempai let out a rare giggle, put her lips at my ears and whispered.

"It's not a question of winning or losing here. Your performance in your fight showed me something important... Something very important. I feel thoroughly proud to be the inheritor of the Serlut-style... and happy... to be able to be your mentor too."

Pon. Rina-sempai knocked me on the shoulder, straightened herself, and said with some traces of smile on her lips,

"There's still some time until the curfew. How about you come over to my room to celebrate? You can bring Eugeo-kun too... As for his mentor, well, I'll let him in too."

On hearing sempai's words, I showed a grin and nodded. I turned around, raised my hand at Eugeo, and pointed at the exit. I saw him and Golgosso-sempai walk there, and I walked side by side with Rina-sempai out of the still energetic arena.

During this time, what took up 70% of my mind wasn't the hidden stash of red wine sempai had, not about Golgosso-sempai's continuous passionate sword skill history lectures—

...I could actually surrender when sparring while a punishment's carried out!!!

But that.

From the corner of my eyes, I saw that Rainos and Wanbell were giving weird stares over here, but I basically ignored them and didn't bother.

Part 6

In the floating city of Aincrad that once existed, there were alcoholic drinks that were like rich red wine and light colored beer.

But logically speaking, even if I gulped down one large barrel of strong alcohol, it would be impossible for me to get drunk. That's because the physical body lying in the real world never took a single drop of alcohol.

Here, what was most shocking was that in this world, the alcohol was all the real stuff— In other words, I would get drunk if I drink a lot. The theory behind it was most likely because the Fluctlights had the signal «Drunken state» and that prompted it. However, it seemed like the designer who designed such a merciless world had a small sense of conscience as even if drunk, it was 'an active state where people don't lose their minds'. Since there won't be drunkards who would make a huge ruckus and start bawling, there wouldn't be people breaking the law by getting drunk.

—Even so, nobody could guarantee whether this protective function would be effective on me, so I stopped after drinking two glasses of grape wine in the 'celebratory event' held in Rina-sempai's room. However, sempai opened a secret stash that was kept for more than 100 years, causing me,

a complete amateur to grape wine, to exclaim that it was good wine, so this self-restraint cost quite a lot of willpower from me.

Sempai, Eugeo, Golgosso-sempai and I got together as we talked about our memories through this year, our predictions for the graduation/promotion duels, and the passionate lectures about sword skills and styles. Time flew, and it was 15 minutes till the curfew of the novice trainee dorm.

I reluctantly retreated from the elite swordsmen dorm and returned back to my dorm with Eugeo. I left my partner who was so drunk he wouldn't wake up in the room and walked to the flower pot on the west side. Even though it was a rest day, I had to water the Zephyria flowers. I walked down the stairs from the second floor and opened the gates of the dorm.

During the time I laid Eugeo on the bed and put my black sword into the drawer, the last trace of light disappeared from the sky, and the outside was shrouded by the night.

I closed my eyes gently and slowly took in the cooling night breeze and the smell of Anemone into my chest— while I was doing so, I inadvertently frowned. There was some form of fragrance that was different from the flowers being planted, the sticky animal-like odor was mixed in slightly. Also, I had an impression on this smell. It was what I smelled at dinner last night... But, this was a smell that shouldn't exist.

I suddenly opened my eyes wide, focused my gaze on the path that divided the flower beds into two sides, and two figures appeared on the other side of the darkness. They were wearing grey uniforms, just like me, the novice trainee uniforms. However, they undid more than 3 buttons in front of their chest, seemingly baring the weird colored shirts inside for others to see. The one who wore the sticky glossy red shirt was Rainos Antinos, while the one wearing a slightly fluorescent light yellow shirt was Wanbell Jezeku.

Why would they, who weren't assigned the job of planting and didn't look like they had any interest in planting, be in the garden... Once this thought appeared in my mind, a bad premonition reached me. I, who took a step out from the door on the west wall of the dorm, stood rooted. Right in front of me, Rainos and Wanbell came right at me, and then stopped 1m away from me.

"Oh my oh my. This is really a coincidence, trainee Kirito."

Rainos used a sly... yet crude voice that was full of ill intent.

"I wanted to look for you now. This would save quite some work."

Wanbell, who was standing right behind, let out an energetic cackle, seemingly giving a melody to these words. I turned back to Rainos, and coldly spoke,

"...What do you want?"

On hearing these really cold words, Wanbell's face twisted, but Rainos swung his right arm to stop him and answered my question.

"Of course, I want to offer my praise to your splendid battle. Who could have thought that a valet who was given a restriction could fight to a draw with that Levanteinn-dono?"

"Oh my my, that's true. Those toying-like sword skills really caused the chairman-dono to have quite the hard time."

"Ku ku ku." Both of them chuckled in unison once they finished. I lowered my voice even further, and spoke,

"Are you praising me? Or are you going to have me sell a fight to you?"

"Hahaha. How can that be possible? High class nobles will never ask peasants to sell anything! Of course, the dorm would still be the dorm!"

After laughing happily for quite a while, Rainos reached his left hand into his uniform pocket, and pulled out something thin and long.

"To praise you for your act... excuse me, for your courageous duel, allow me to offer this. You have to take this."

Rainos took a step forward and stuffed something into the chest pocket of my uniform.

"...Then, we'll take our leave first. Sweet dreams, Kirito-dono."

Raino's muttered slightly to me from close distance as he smirked. He shook his blond hair and passed by me. Wanbell then followed him and brought his face over.

"Don't get too cocky, you peasant without a family name."

He left these words and followed Rainos.

BAM! Even after both of them walked into the door and seemingly slammed the gate shut, I was unable to move for the time being. That was because—

What Rainos stuck into my chest was a flower bud that had a near-blue leaf and was about to be released. I used my icy cold right hand to take it out from my pocket and stared at it carefully.

The tender stem was violently snapped, and it was not any of the «Four Sacred Flowers» grown in the flower beds. It was the West Empire produce, the Zephyria flowers that I continued to grow painstakingly no matter how many times I failed during this half year.

Once I realized this, I gritted my teeth with enough force to crush the bud. If I had my sword now, maybe I would have rushed into the dorm and sliced Rainos and Wanbell up into countless pieces. I gripped tightly onto the light water-colored flower bud in my right hand and charged towards the garden. I ran past the cross junction of the road and into the shed near the wall on the other wall. The white porcelain planted laid at a corner of the shed entered my eyes.

"...Ah, ahhh...."

My throat let out such a hoarse voice.

The 23 Zephyria seedlings that sprouted from the seeds I bought from the spice merchants, these seeds that usually grew in a foreign land, and were about to sprout out— were all mercilessly snapped in half.

Round flower buds were devastated as they fell around the planter, and they had lost their unique blue-green color. The stems left in the dirt were sagged, and obviously, their Lives were decreasing drastically.

In the midst of these dead flower buds, the weapons for this massacre were standing there like tombstones. Those were long and narrow sickles used for plants with round fruits. Some people... No, Rainos and Wanbell swung these sickles and mercilessly hacked the flower buds down.

The strength was sucked out from my legs, and I knelt down in front of the planter with a thud.

I blankly stared at the flower buds that were scattered around, thinking with my mind that was half numb.

Why? While I knew the motive and methods clearly, but why were they able to do such things? Deliberately destroying other people's goods was completely against the Taboo Index. Even high-ranking nobles shouldn't be able to break this absolute law.

In Underworld, the possession rights of all the items were indicated without error. I knew that only after going on my journey. When opening my unique «window», those considered my possessions would have a small P marker at the corner. On the other hand, those without a P marker would not be mine, so it's impossible for them to steal it or wreck it.

It's true that these growing plants didn't belong to anyone, but the authority of the soil, the land belonged to everyone. The plants planted on whomever's land would belong to that person. The Anemones grown at the flower beds belonged to the Academy. Also, I thought the zephyria flowers that were in the planter would similarly belong to me as personal items I bought from the market in the 6th district and planted in the planter in front of me. That was what I thought.

My mind, which was befuddled by rage and despair, thought till here. I thought of something that caused me to widen my eyes.

Soil. The black soil that was contained in the planter... wasn't dug from the land of the Academy nor bought from the market. It was brought over from the land outside Central, in the wilderness that didn't belong to anything. I once told this to Miller of the planting committee and the rest. Rainos' group knew of this and decided,

"Since the soil is from the wilderness that didn't belong to anyone, these flowers don't belong to anyone', right?"

If that was the case... then, this was a mistake I made. Since I left it in the flower garden that anyone could access, I should have cautiously thought through the ownership issues.

The people of Underworld would definitely not break the law. But this didn't mean that all the residents of this world were kind. Some of them were people who even thought that 'anything not restricted by the law can be done'.

I should have realized this during the Zakkaria swordsmanship tournament.

"...I'm sorry..."

I picked up the flower buds that were scattered on the floor with my right hand and gathered them in my left. However, what was originally a blue-green color got obviously greyer in my palm.

The moment I picked up all 23 stems and flower buds, their Lives dropped to 0. The flower buds formed dream-like blue-green light particles and dissipated in mid-air.

Tears inadvertently rolled out from my eyes.

I forcefully tried to turn my lips into a smile, seemingly trying to laugh at myself for having bad kids snap my own flowers. However, my cheeks merely numbed up. The accumulated tears finally fell, and a small puddle landed on the bricks beside my feet.

I finally understood what I was putting my hopes into these Zephyria flowers for.

The first reason for growing these flowers was to test the power of imagination in Underworld.

The second reason... was to grant the wish of Rina-sempai, who once said to me 'I want to see authentic Zephyria flowers for real once'.

However, there was a third reason I had never discovered till now. I was definitely trying to use these flowers as my vestige by desperately trying to make the flowers bloom on foreign land. I wanted to share my burden with these flowers, the loneliness and burden... of leaving my beloved people in the real world, without having any idea when I would return back...

Tears continued to roll and glide down my cheeks, dripping on the floor.

I desperately held back my sobs and curled up, trying to use my hands to support myself from the floor.

I again remembered that voice.

—Go and believe.

—Go and believe in the power of the flowers that are growing in foreign land. Also, believe in your own power for growing these flowers till now.

I heard this inexplicable voice many times during my long journey. It seemed to be a female voice, but it wasn't a voice I was familiar with. Also, it wasn't the voice of the young girl I heard at the cave passing through the

Mountain Range of the Edge 2 years ago. It was a calm, wise, gentle and warm voice...

"...But, they're...all gone."

I muttered. That voice calmly answered.

—It's alright.

—The stems growing in this world are still trying their best to survive. And...do you feel it. The many Sacred Flowers in the flower beds are trying to save their small friends. They want to give their power of Life to them. You can pass these wishes to the Zephyria stems.

"...I can't do it. I can't use those high level Sacred Arts."

—Spells are all just a way to arrange thoughts and guide «emotions»... The power of imagination used through ones' mouth. Right now, spells and mediums are unnecessary.

—Here, wipe off your tears and stand up. Go feel, feel the prayers of these flowers.

—Feel, the laws of this world...

The voice ended here, seemingly disappearing somewhere in the midst of the night sky.

I took a deep breath into my chest that was still trembling, exhaled, used the sleeves of my uniform to wipe away my tears, supported myself and stood up.

I slowly turned around, and an unbelievable scene appeared right in front of me. The four Sacred Flowers that were grown in the 4 parts of the flower beds... the blooming Anemones, the Marigolds that weren't even budding, the Dahlia that was growing a little stem and even the Cattleya that was hidden underground were all giving off a murky green glow in the dark night.

Sacred Power. Space resource. These words were all meaningless in the face of this kind, steady yet powerful light.

I reached my arms out to these 4 Sacred Flowers, seemingly guided.

"...Please, give me power... Life, share some with me."

I muttered slightly and imagined. I imagined the Sacred Flowers giving off Life, using me as a catalyst and flowing to the Zephyria flowers left in the planter.

Countless flickering green lines appeared in the flower beds. They continued to get close to each other, weave with each other, and finally became countless thick bonds. I waved my fingers, and they danced in the air silently before finally moving to a single point.

At this point, I just needed to watch them. The bonds of light covered the planter that was left only with wilted stems, seemingly surrounding it a few times... and seemingly forming a huge flower as it got absorbed by the soil and disappeared.

And then,

The 23 stems slowly grew at a speed the naked eye could see.

The flower buds slowly expanded, seemingly spreading their sharp precious blade-like leaves, and seemingly protected by them.

I watched this scene, and tears again swelled.

This was... such an inexplicable world. Everything should just be a virtual being, but it had a beauty even the real world couldn't match... the power of Life... and the firm will.

"...Thank you."

I thanked the 4 Sacred Flowers in the flower beds and the owner of that inexplicable voice. I pondered for a while, and took out the school emblem from my uniform collar that was held with a pin. I reached my hand out, put it in a corner of the planter, and seemingly declared: This is my territory.

Once I return to the room, I'll say sorry to the black sword lying in the drawer... the branch of the Gigas Cedar. And then, I'll thank it for helping me in the duel against Uolo."

As I considered this, I continued to stare intently at the Zephyria flowers that regained its life. The 7.30pm bell rang, and I finally stood up from the flower beds and walked towards the dorm.

I inadvertently turned my head right in front of the door, and everything, the stone hedge surrounding the flower beds, the back of the large practice arena roof and the Axiom Church's Centoria Cathedral that looked like it

was about to cut this starry night sky entered my eyes. Orange lights came out from numerous windows like skyscrapers in the real world, yet it was much taller and more beautiful than those skyscrapers.

—Suddenly, a light left the tower from a rather tall tower.

How could that be? I stared at the light spot, but that wasn't my eyes seeing things or an illusion. The proof was that the light spot continued to increase its brightness and closed in on the North Centoria streets. The light continued to maintain its height as it gradually glided, and its real identity was...

"...A flying dragon!"

I couldn't be mistaken here. That was a light from a large lamp on the dragon armor as it flew in the air. That wasn't a signal or warning light, but a lamp let the people on the ground show their fear and awe. Riding on that dragon's back was one of the strongest law enforcers in the world— an «Integrity Knight».

The giant dragon unfolded its wings, seemingly gliding through the night sky and flew to the north east. It was most likely fulfilling its duty of protecting the human world as it flew to the Mountain Range of the Edge. Eugeo and I spent a year finishing this 750km, yet that dragon only needed a day.

The light of the lamp disappeared, and I turned back to look at the splendor of the Cathedral. The Integrity Knight probably flew from ¾ of the height. Maybe there was something like an airport there. I continued to look up, and the highest level was mixed into the night sky, so I couldn't tell. There should be a door linking to the real world, what I was looking for.

However— There was a faint feeling of wanting to go home, increasing day by day. Was it my imagination? I was also getting the feeling of wanting to know more about this world, unlike what I wanted. Was I thinking too much...?

I took in the fragrance of these flowers and slowly exhaled it. I looked away from the Cathedral and gently pushed aside the large old gate of the exit.

At the end of March—

Second ranked elite swordsman trainee Sortiliena Serlut defeated Top ranked elite swordsman trainee Uolo Levanteinn during the final

graduations selection battle, and graduated as the top student of Norlangarth Master Swords Academy.

As she left, I handed her the planter full of Zephyria flowers. Rina-sempai showed me a beaming smile for the first time, accompanied by tears.

Two weeks after she graduated, she took part in the «Empire Swordsmanship Tournament» held in the imperial arena, but was matched against a member of the Norlangarth Knights. Unfortunately, after an intense battle, she lost.

Interlude II

The sound of boots echoed throughout the wide room.

"Elite Swordsman trainee Eugeo-dono, I would like to report! Today's sweeping is completed!"

The source of the voice was a young girl that was wearing a grey novice swordsman trainee uniform.

As it had not been even a month since she entered school in spring and became a valet, her posture was full of nervousness.

Eugeo already tried his best to treat her nicely, but no matter what he said, she could never relax... But Eugeo understood this situation because he was the same last year. In a certain sense, the fact that there were only 12 elite swordsmen was already scarier than the instructors themselves for a novice student.

It would take around 2 months to initiate a normal conversation, and it was the same for Eugeo as well. However, she was not a typical partner after all, and this would be the only exception.

After closing the old sacred arts textbook, Eugeo stood up from the high-back chair and nodded as he said.

"Thanks for everything, Tiezé. You can now go back to your dorm... Eh, erm..."

His vision switched to the girl with tea colored hair standing next to the crimson haired Tiezé, who was also straightening her back.

"...Sorry, Ronye. I told that person to come back before his room is swept..."

Eugeo apologized for his partner who disappeared after the training, the novice trainee called Ronye widened her eyes and shook her head,

"It's-It's fine, the mission's only completed after the report!"

"Well, even if it is embarrassing, please wait for a little longer. I don't know how to say it, well... I do apologize for my roommate's behavior..."

The Norlangarth Empire's Master Sword Academy was an institute that gathered the noble sons and daughters of Norlangarth and groomed them to become the best swordsmen. But once they stepped through the gates of the school, those with noble blood would have to start on the same line as the other novice trainees.

For the first year, there was almost no chance to even touch a real sword, so the only thing they could do was to continuously train with a wooden sword, studying the Art of Battle and learn Sacred Arts. Also, the novice trainees had to complete all the other miscellaneous tasks while studying.

The task assigned to them was determined by their score in the sword skill exam. 90% of the students were assigned to clean the school and maintain the tools, or grow the Sacred flowers. The top 12 students were assigned as valets for the elite swordsmen, and were often the target of jealousy, envy from their peers and 2 months of nervousness.

But, even though they were called valets, the actual tasks they got did not really differ much as compared to the other students. They cleaned up the elite swordsmen's rooms like their peers cleaning the classroom and the training area. If the student the valet followed was a bad person who deliberately threw trash, made ruckus or had the tendency to sometimes go out and disappear, the valet would be troubled every day.

"...If you wish, Ronye, I can talk to the teacher and change your mentor... If you keep following that person, it will definitely be a tough year for you."

"It's-It's not tough at all!"

After hearing Eugeo's idea, Ronye once again shook her head, and at this moment, there was a familiar noise that came not from the door, but from the open window that was filled with the yellow sunset.

"Fufu, what are you talking about behind my back?"

The person who arrived in the room through the 3rd floor window was the one wearing the elite swordsman uniform, Kirito. His appearance was the same, but his uniform was pitch black, unlike Eugeo's blue and grey one. The color of their uniform could be chosen as this was one of the many privileges of an elite swordsman trainee.

After seeing Kirito carry a bag that smelled really good, Ronye showed a relieved face, but then immediately showed a tense expression again, and the sound of boots echoed around the room.

"Elite swordsman Kirito-sama, I would like to report! Today's sweeping is complete without delay!"

"Okay, thanks for everything."

Kirito embarrassedly scratched his head as he answered Ronye, not being used to the idea of having a valet as usual. Looking at him, Eugeo gave a wry smile and started to officially ask his partner what was going on.

"Uh, Kirito, I won't tell you not to go out of campus, but the girls are a lot busier than you, so please be back before the sweeping is completed. Anyways, why did you have to come in through the window?"

"Coming through the window would be the shortest distance if you're coming back from the 3rd Eastern Street. You should also remember that, Ronye and Tiezé. Maybe it will be useful in the future."

"Don't teach them weird things! ...Speaking of the 3rd Eastern Street, the things in the paper bag are honey pies right?"

The sweet smell that was flowing through Kirito's hands violently stimulated Eugeo's pre-dinner stomach.

"...It is true those are good, but you don't have to buy so much."

"Fufu, you could have just said it directly if you want them, Eugeo-kun."

Kirito smirked as he took out 2 fresh golden honey pies. He placed one in his mouth, one next to Eugeo, and gently placed the remaining paper bag into Ronye's hands.

"When you return to the dorm, eat it with your roommates."

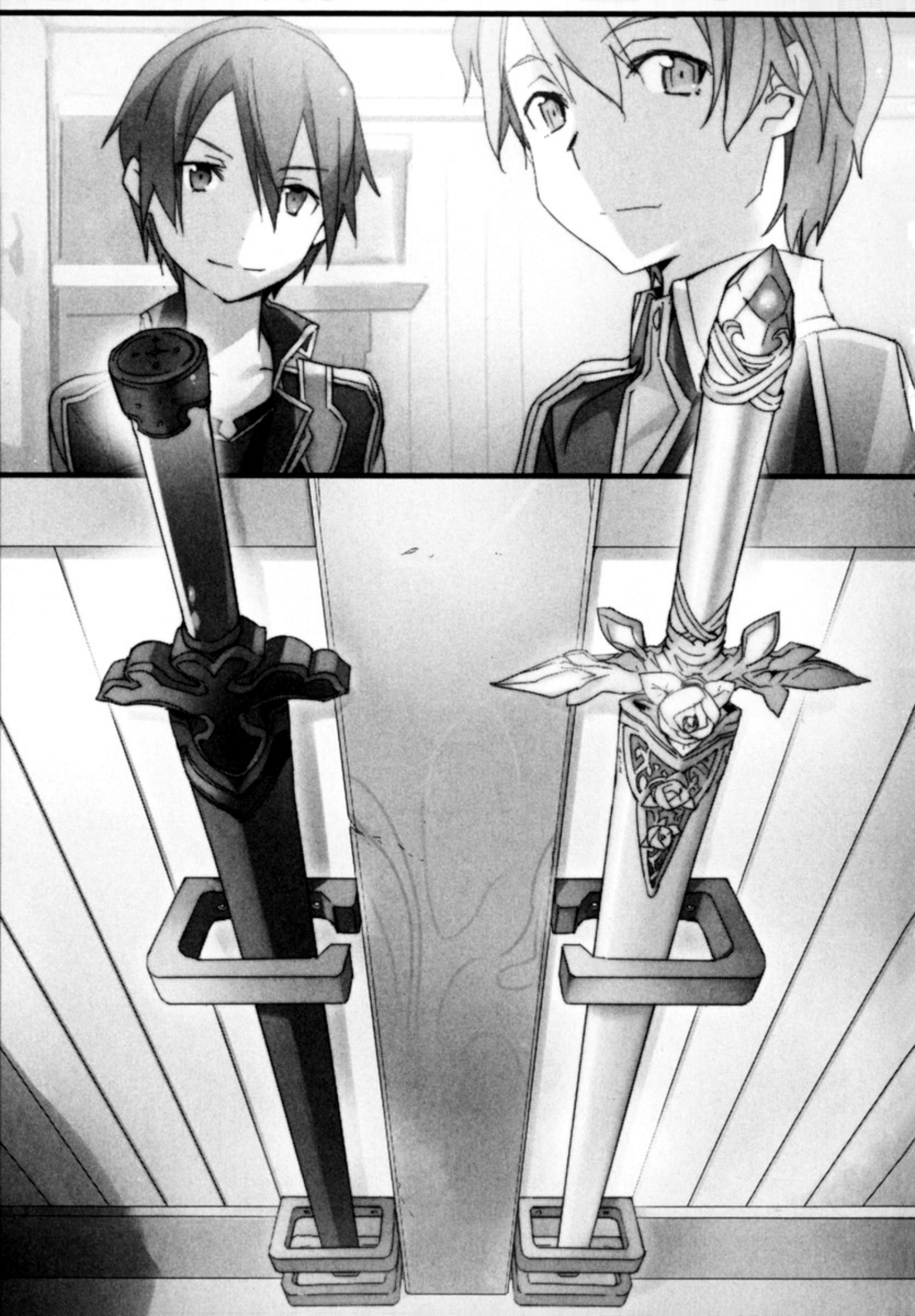
"WAAA!" Ronye and Tiezé squealed in happiness like the 15-16 year old girls they were, but immediately frantically stood back again.

"Tha-Thank you very much, Elite swordsman trainee-sama!" Ronye said.

"Let's hurry back to the dorm so that the food's "Life" won't drop too much! See you tomorrow!" Tiezé spoke loudly.

After doing a quick simple salute, the 2 walked through the room with their boots calling, opened the door, and went out to the corridor.

They nodded slightly as the door was being closed, and happy squeals could be heard with the rattling footsteps that quickly disappeared as they moved further and further away.



"..."

While taking a large bite into the freshly baked pie, Eugeo stared at Kirito.

"...What?"

"No, it's nothing. It's just that I'm thinking, oh elite swordsman trainee Kirito-sama, that you might have forgotten the true reason why we are here."

"Ha, who can forget about that?"

Kirito quickly finished his pie, and after licking his thumbs, his black eyes immediately looked out the window— far beyond the beginner swordsmen's dorm was the Axiom Church's giant tower that stood in the middle of Centoria.

"3 more times... We finally reached here. First, we have to beat the other 10 elite swordsmen during the graduation test, and get the roles of representatives of this school. Then, we have to defeat the old guys, those knights and guards during the Imperial Swordsmanship Tournament. Next, we have to be the last 2 standing in the Four Empires Unity Tournament. Finally, you can become an Integrity Knight and openly enter that tower."

"Mn... 1 more year... then, we can finally..."

—Finally meet her, the blond girl, my friend who was taken by the Integrity Knights in front of my eyes eight years ago.

Eugeo turned his eyes away from the Central Cathedral far away, and focused on the black and white swords lying at the wall of the room.

...As long as the blades of fate guiding us are still here, we will definitely not fail...

Eugeo strongly believed without any doubt.

(Alicization Running End)

Afterword

I'm Kawahara Reki. This is the «Sword Art Online 10 Alicization Running» for everyone.

The tag «Running» was just as what it stated, how it was going on, the running of the process. I did not expect this volume to not give the impression of running however…the front half was completely filled with an explanation of the situation (such things would happen when I write my books). When exactly will Sword become Art? I think there should be quite a few readers who thought this way. I will say some usual words through this print. I'm really sorry for having so many explanations.

On a side note, I need to confess to everyone. The questionable chapter where Kikuoka-shi, who should be on the protagonist side, started talking about all those things were not a representation of the author's thoughts. His motives were all developed from his position. Of course, there were many characters with opposing motives (in fact, Asuna denied Kikuoka's thoughts…). I did not want to do this «distancing of character and author» in the first place and explain my position in the main text to the readers, but this part of my work here was not very positive…I will continue to work hard on improving my writing abilities, and I hope everyone can understand.

Also, another thing I have to apologize for. This book was released on the 10th of July, 2012, breaking the traditional format of selling «a specific few months after release» ever since it was released. I wanted to match the release of the TV anime SAO release time, but it was true that I risked the timing. I am really sorry to all the readers who were hoping for regular releases! Also, I predict (or maybe, I hope) that «Accel World 12» after this volume will be released in August as planned. After that I will go back to releasing every alternate months. I think I really have to work hard in aspects I have to work hard in. If there is any day where the schedule collapses, I will apologize fully then…even though I say so, I will be really sorry if that 'which day' would happen this year…

As I stated before, the TV anime premiere should be starting while this volume's released. SAO, which started in a certain corner of the web as a web novel 10 years ago, was serialized by Dengeki Bunko, turned into a manga, became a Drama CD, and animated. Of course, I am really happy, but I still felt a little sense of disbelief. This was not a game script, but there

were many breaking points here. If the supervisor was not Miki-shi, if the illustrator was not abec-san, if I did not win the grand prize of the 15th Dengeki Bunko light novel contest, if the web serialization was stopped, if I did not have the idea of 'writing a death game VRMMO' ten years ago, there probably would not be such a situation. I am basically a person who will do when I want to and definitely not do when I do want to, but this work called SAO gave me such great power I had never imagined before. Of course, most of this here would be the power of the great readers who gave support to this work and the author. The story will continue, and if I can continue to accompany Kirito on his adventure, that will be grateful.

Unknowingly, it is now the 3rd page. I want to write about some recent situation…but I cannot think of anything good to write…! The one bike I liked had a fixed travelling distance, exactly similar to the treadmill I have at home. I wondered whether the output will decrease with the input, so I tried my best to think about what I wanted to do, going everywhere to travel and stuff, but due to time constraints, my interested were limited. To be honest, I really want to do these things now! That was what I felt when I wrote this original script (laughs). Even if I do so, my writing speed will not increase, which really infuriates my heart.

It is only 3 years after release that I am expressing such thoughts, but I am really fortunate to write what I want to say. It looks easy, but in fact, it is really, really hard. And even if I work hard, what I could do got lesser and lesser…as for my health, I have to continue cycling. My aim is to cycle 150km every week.

There are still 14 lines, but the time limit for handing in my script would be 10 minutes later, so I will stop here. If it were the old me, I would take 5 lines writing my thanks, but I can only write a few things here, so I will use future developments instead…

In the third volume of the «Alicization series», Kirito and Eugeo will finally move to the core of Underworld. How the world is constructed, and who rules this world will be revealed…these should be all for future developments, so please continue to support the next volume of this series.

I hope for great support for the anime and the SAO game edition that is developed by the makers. I guess it will not be those death games you cannot log out from!

A certain day in May 2012, Kawahara Reki

References

1. ↑ He is referring to a famous movie called "The Truman Show" en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Truman_Show
2. ↑ A rough translation would be the term "Oh dear" or "Oh geez".
3. ↑ 蒼風斬
4. ↑ Okay, the original text gave it as 中心角四十五度, which will mean central angle of 45 degrees, but the author himself has corrected it to be 90 degrees. Tweet is here
5. ↑ ε or 4. See: Arabic numerals or Eastern Arabic numerals for more details.
6. ↑ Uolo uses 'watashi' in this case.
7. ↑ Text gave it as 至近, and no, we're not talking about sword slashes that can fly across the landscape

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